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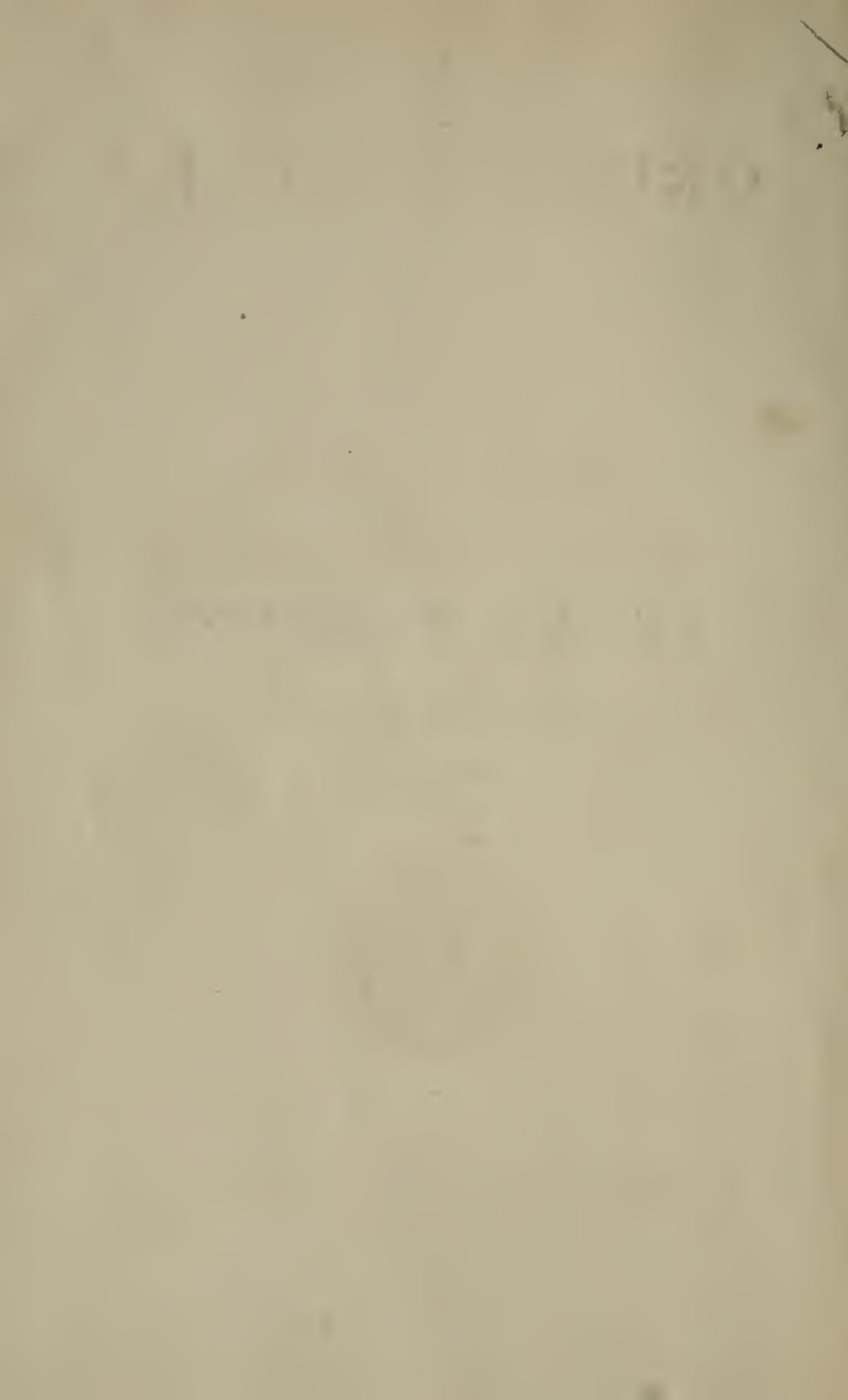
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CRUEL FORTUNE

VOL. III



CRUEL FORTUNE

BY

ELLEN C. CLAYTON

AUTHOR OF

“QUEENS OF SONG,” “NOTABLE WOMEN,” “MISS MILLY MOSS”

ETC

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III



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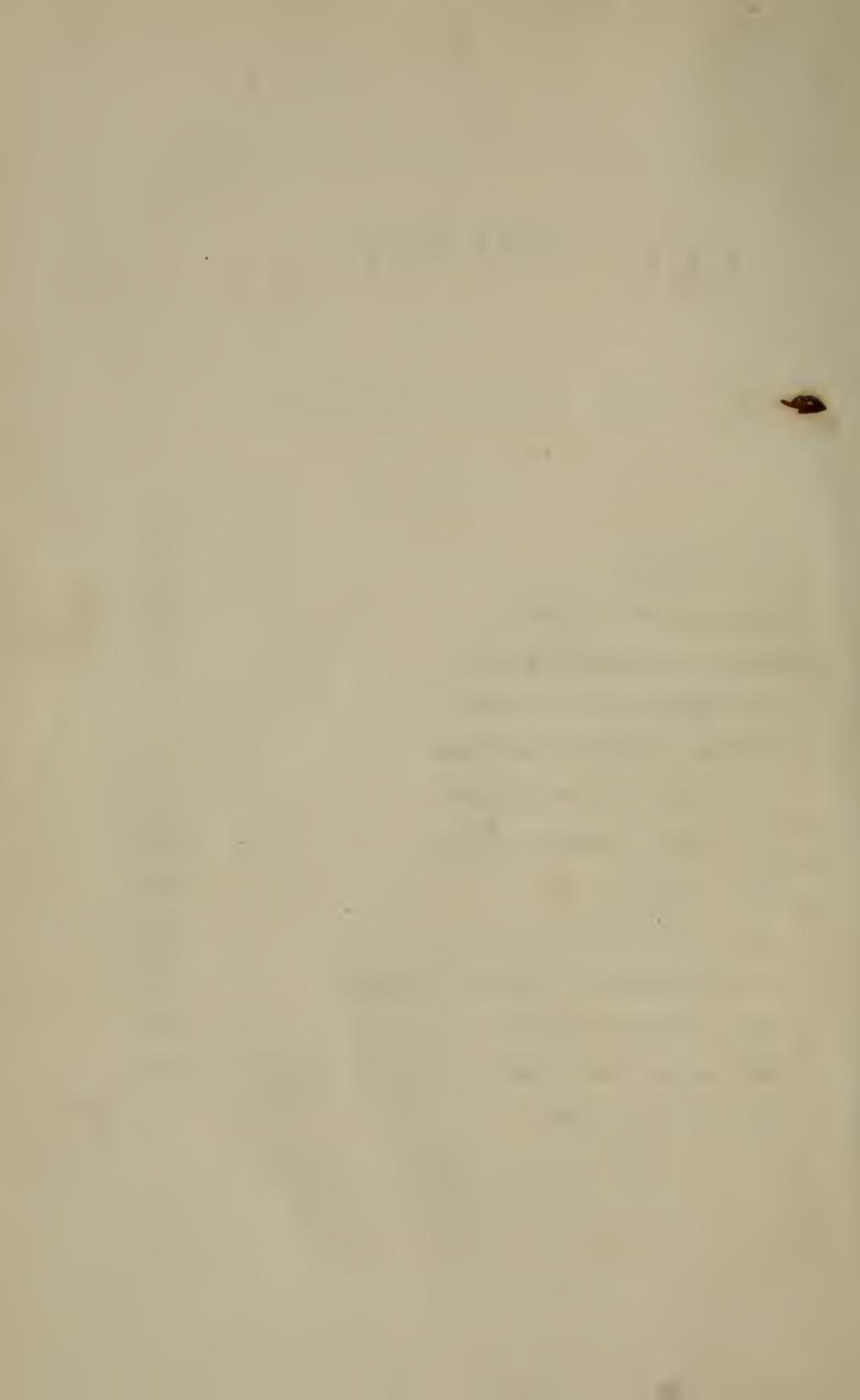
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CRUEL FORTUNE

CHAPTER I.

A FLIGHT.

It had happened that Val left her house while Mademoiselle Roussel was lingering over her dinner; otherwise the probability is that the Frenchwoman would have witnessed her departure. She did not affect any concealment of her movements, but ordered a light cart to convey her trunks to the railway-station, and then, as the distance was so short, walked to catch the train, carrying her boy in her arms.

It was a fine autumn evening. The rusty old weathercocks on the house-tops were giving forth occasional ghostly sobs, to which gusts of wind went whistling and sighing a melancholy chorus among the creaking branches of the trees. A few light clouds were flying rapidly across the sky, as though striving to

escape from some invisible enemy; and between them the stars were glancing down, trembling like bright tears in blue eyes.

Mrs. Verner walked with apparent tranquillity across to the station, holding Aubrey tightly to her breast, and keeping him well covered up in the heavy shawl which enveloped her own fragile figure. Although outwardly so calm, however, there was a dreadful struggle going on in her heart, as she thus sought to escape from the frightful spectre which had risen before her, and shown her an awful abyss, —which, had she faced it, would have proved no more substantial than the peasant boy's stick, sheet, and lanthorn phantom which terrifies the rustic wayfarer. She had not thought she would feel so faint and exhausted as she now found herself; and she absolutely trembled with weakness, so much so that she was alarmed lest she should fail in reaching her destination. Her head seemed dizzy, and even outward objects floated before her eyes, making but little impression on her mind; a dim haze obscured everything. The lamps at the station which she was approaching flickered before her sight, glancing here and there, mockingly, like demons with eyes of fire.

She entered the station, and sat down for a few moments on the bench by the wall, to steady herself, then she went over to the counter where tickets were given out.

“A through ticket to London,” she said, in a half-stifled voice, to the station-master, laying down the exact fare. “First class.”

The station-master knew her as a neighbour, but was not sufficiently acquainted with her to offer to exchange any words. He was a little struck by her exceeding pallor, and by the tones of her voice. He said nothing, however, but gave her the required ticket. There was no traveller on the platform besides herself, and the two porters did not even make a pretence of being busy, any more than the one or two loungers who were waiting for some friends to arrive by the next train.

The train came up whistling and screaming in a few minutes. Val was guided almost like a blind person, from the platform to the carriage in which she was to travel, which happened to be unoccupied. For aught she knew to the contrary, they might have been placing her in a flying machine which would bear her to some desolate corner of the earth, far from human ken.

Now that everything was settled, and return was virtually impossible, she fell into a strange state of mind, akin to lunacy. She lay back in the carriage, overcome with wild despair and anguish. Like a mirror which has been breathed upon, her overcharged brain received partly the images around, but refused to present these in their correct forms. If she had been capable of remembering anything, she would now have understood why Marie Antoinette's hair turned white during her transit from Varennes to Paris, and that of the Duchess de Luxembourg during four and twenty hours.

Not his wife! That thought was repeated in one monotonous clang ing note; she could not cease to think of it for an instant. A disgraced outcast! Worse than *nothing*! Red hot irons seemed searing her brain, beating time to a horrible Satanic tune; and brilliant sparks of hell-fire were dancing a diabolical rigadoon before her burning eyes. With her child alone remaining to her, abandoned, spurned by the whole world, she was going, she scarce knew whither—another Hagar in the wilderness.

The highly matter-of-fact and strictly busi-

ness-like whistle sounded; the train slackens, as Val thus leans back in her solitary despair, the train stops, and the guard walks rapidly past the windows, calling out some disjointed word continually. There is a bustle on the platform; people get out and get in, for it is one of the principal stations on the line; particular injunctions are given to "Take care of yourselves"—"Good-bye, dear; be sure to remember that—" "And tell them—" "All right, old chap—" "Oh, I forgot to say to Charles that—" then all fades into the night-air, and the disconnected sentences are left half-finished, and succeeded by a wild shriek as of agony from a living creature in dire distress, and then subdued sobs and mutterings are heard from the engine; and then the train starts afresh.

Whish! I-r-r-r! The lights in the station rapidly diminish to sparks. Whirr! Outward darkness relieved by confused November-fog visions of trees, cottages, hedges. The air blows keenly and freshly across fields and meadows, against the closed windows of the carriages. A few night birds start up, alarmed by the approaching monster, and flap their heavy wings lazily and sombrely. The monster

heeds them not, but dashes on its way, snorting like a war-charger, occasionally rushing underneath a brick arch with a sound as if drawing a mighty sword from a steel scabbard.

Then the train slackens again, with strange screwing and grinding noises, and an unpleasant odour of water thrown on hot ashes. And then it stops.

Fleetpond. A well-lighted refreshment-room, a platform filled with more hurrying figures; porters calmly, philosophically, and deliberately busy, perfecting mysterious pre-conceived ideas respecting red-hot wheels. The guard glances in at the window of Mrs. Verner's carriage, and calls the name of the station. She looks vaguely at him, but says nothing.

The train starts again. The funny man in the second class not being in a happy vein, and rather tired, simply echoes the whistle and laughs. The monster goes trampling on its iron way, relentless as Time or Fate, regardless of everything but its ultimate destiny.

Another station—Farnborough this time—another platform, more busy figures, different, yet the same as the others. The guard, who

has taken some peculiar interest in the solitary traveller from the first, looks in at the window of the carriage in which he had placed her. She is still lying in exactly the same attitude, in the same corner of the carriage.

The train whirls on. More stations, more calling of incomprehensible names, more people, more hurrying, more lights, bustle, life, change. At last the train stops finally, and the guard goes along, crying, in a clear, sharp tone,

“Wat’la Station! Wat’la Station! Wat’la Station!”

Val, unaccustomed to railway travelling, did not know that they had arrived at the termination of her journey, and did not move until the guard came, and unlocking the door, told her they were in London. At the sound of his voice she shook off her lethargy, and alighted from the carriage. When on the platform she recovered her self-possession.

The guard, who saw that she was perfectly inexperienced in the matter of travelling, took all her affairs in hand, looked out her luggage, had it piled on the roof of a cab, and then went to Val, who had sunk on a bench.

"Where do you want to go to?" he asked, respectfully.

Val looked up at his kindly face, and recollected that she had not the slightest idea of where she ought to go.

"I am a stranger in London," she said, almost pleadingly. "I don't know where to go for a lodging."

The guard, with a momentary glance of surprise, answered promptly.

"I suppose you want a respectable place? —of course you do—a good hotel, now. I should recommend, if you don't mind expense, Morley's or Radley's, or Anderton's, or Raggett's, or the Adelaide, or the Bridge House, or — well, say Morley's. Shall we say Morley's?"

"Is it a quiet place?" asked Val, timidly.

"Well, you know, you can't expect hotels to be hermitages," answered the guard, smiling. "But they are all quiet enough, considering. Suppose we say Radley's. That's pretty quiet, and very comfortable."

"Very well," said Val. "Thank you for the information." She actually felt grateful for his kindly manner; and extending her hand, she dropped something bright into his half-

closed palm. The man then placed her in the cab, and gave the driver his direction.

“Radley’s Hotel!”

The cab rattled off, out from the railway station, over the bridge, down the Strand, and was soon at the door of Radley’s Hotel. Val alighted, her luggage was carried into the house, she paid cabby about three times as much as he had any right to ask, and was speedily ushered into a bed-room, for it was about ten o’clock.

The next morning she did not rise till a late hour, being exhausted, almost worn out by the agitation and actual fatigue she had suffered. Having breakfasted, and dressed little Aubrey, she put on her bonnet and mantle, and sent for a cab, as she was so little acquainted with London, and so fearful of the crowds hurrying through the principal streets, that she was afraid of walking.

She directed the driver to go to Kirby Street, Cavendish Square; for she wanted to see Rose Atherley. She had not written to Rose with any regularity, and the correspondence had dropped some months subsequent to her marriage. The fault was, to a certain extent, on her side, and she now regretted it, for she

sorely needed Rose's advice and sympathy, having not a friend in the world besides her. As they had not exchanged letters for more than two years, she did not know where to seek Rose except at the house of her father, Mr. Atherley.

The cab stopped at the house of Mr. Atherley. Val alighted, paid the man the fare he demanded, without questioning its legality, dismissed him, as she did not know how long she might be detained, and then knocked at the door. She was ignorant that, some thirteen years before this day, her father had knocked at this very door, to vainly implore his brother for bread for his wife and his children.

Her knock was responded to by a boy in buttons. The name of this youth was not Watkins—it was Barker. He was rather a stout boy, with a face inclining to magenta.

“Y’s, ’m, he be,” said Barker, in reply to Val’s inquiry as to whether Mr. Atherley was at home. She did not like to ask for Rose, for if that young lady had changed her name, it might be awkward to ask for “Miss Atherley.” She did not think it likely that such an event had happened, for she fancied

that Rose would have written to her on so auspicious an occasion. However, time would not admit of any profound meditation on this subject. She drew a card from her card-case, but just as she was about to give it to the boy, the thought struck her that she had no right to the name thereon inscribed. Her face turned a shade paler, and she bit her lip; then, reflecting that she had no other card, and that the Atherleys' would not recognise her by any other name than that of Raymond or Verner, she placed the card in the hand of the boy, and said that she wished to see Mr. Atherley.

“Certingly, mem. Will you walk into the drrorin’ room, mem, if you please, mem,” said Barker, with great urbanity, although he had observed her hesitation with scarcely disguised astonishment.

Val followed him up the richly-carpeted staircase. He ushered her into the drawing-room, closed the door, and disappeared. She sat down, with Aubrey on her knee, near one of the deeply-curtained windows overlooking the street. After the lapse of a few minutes Mr. Atherley appeared, holding in his hand the card which she had sent to him, and ad-

vanced, but did not seem to be conscious that he had ever met her before.

Val rose, putting Aubrey on the chair whereon she had been seated, and advanced to meet her old teacher, but stopped, on observing his puzzled look.

“ You do not remember me?” she said.

“ I—well—indeed, madam, I regret that——”

“ Your old pupil must have changed very much. You do not recollect Valentine Raymond?”

A look of recognition passed over Mr. Atherley’s face, and he offered his hand with an apologetic air.

“ I was not aware that you had married,” he said. “ Yet I suppose I must have been informed of the fact, rude as I may appear in not being able to call it to mind. I am rejoiced to see you. I hope you have not forgot your old studies. You know you were one of my favourite scholars.”

“ I have called upon you with the hope of seeing your daughter Rose,” said Val, without noticing his complimentary remark.

“ I beg your pardon?” said Mr. Atherley, as if he had not caught her words.

“ I wish to see Rose, if she is in London.”

“ To see——?”

“ Your daughter—Rose Atherley.”

“ I have only one daughter, and her name is Floretta—Mrs. Gardner. I have no other daughter,” replied Mr. Atherley, icily. Val looked at him with bewilderment, and recoiled.

“ She is dead?” she asked.

“ Who?”

“ Rose.”

“ I assure you I know not of whom you are speaking.”

“ But—good heavens! Mr. Atherley, I entreat you—why do you say you have no daughter named Rose, and yet you say that you do not know whether she is dead or not? I don’t understand you.”

“ Neither do I understand you, my dear madam,” answered Mr. Atherley, with a chilling laugh, “ so we are like school-children, trying to guess riddles.”

“ But why will you not tell me—where can I find Rose—my dear friend and schoolfellow, your daughter?”

“ Mrs. Verner, I have already had the honour to inform you that I have *one* daughter. I have now no other child. I trust that this

information will satisfy you. You surely do not doubt my word?"

Val sank back in her chair, bewildered. Then a sudden thought flashed across her mind, and she stared at Mr. Atherley. Perhaps Rose had disgraced herself. If so, of course her father would thus deliberately disown her. Mr. Atherley sat down on the opposite side of the window, and played with his watchchain.

"Well, Mrs. Verner, and how have you been getting on? I hope you are happy in the connubial state? It was an unpardonable piece of stupidity on my part not to remember you. But you were very young when I last saw you, and people do change so much. It is extraordinary. This is your little boy, I suppose? Charming little fellow—fine boy for his age. How old is he?"

He ran on, saying anything he could think of. Val was so startled by this new and unexpected shock that she could hardly command herself sufficiently to answer coherently to his observations. At last she rose, and taking up Aubrey, wished Mr. Atherley "good morning." His manner had completely chilled her, and she felt as if this meeting was an omen of the future awaiting her.

Mr. Atherley attended her downstairs, even to the street door, where he bade her farewell, in a perfectly polite manner. He did not ask her where she was staying, nor about her husband, nor indeed about anything, and seemed glad when she went away.

Val passed into the street, and felt as if she was now utterly alone in the world. She did not know where to turn for help, for advice, for sympathy. On gaining the street, she hesitated for a moment, irresolute as to whether she ought to go to the right or to the left, being entirely ignorant of this locality, and looked about, hoping that some one would come up in order that she might inquire her way. As she paused, one of the windows of the house which she had just quitted was opened with much noise. She raised her head, and saw the portly form of Mrs. Atherley, who was making a variety of mystic signs to her. The good lady had her bonnet on, and appeared to be ready dressed for walking.

Puzzled as to the meaning of this pantomime, and glad of an opportunity of seeing Mrs. Atherley, although she had met her only once in her life, Val looked for some sign that she could understand. Mrs. Atherley pointed

with some energy to the right, so Val supposed that she was to proceed in that direction. She did so, and then looked back, to see what would ensue. Mrs. Atherley nodded, but made another sign that she was to walk slowly. Accordingly, she did walk slowly, and had not walked far when she heard footsteps behind her. She turned, and saw Mrs. Atherley, puffing like a portly steam-engine, for the good lady had walked very rapidly from her house.

“My dear”—said Mrs. Atherley, speaking at first with difficulty, as she had to recover breath, after her race. “My dear child, ah, what a thing it is to be young. You should not have walked so far. Never mind, I don’t want to speak of *that* now. Am I right in supposing that you came to see Rose? Of course I am, for you know so little of me, and although Mr. Atherley was your teacher, yet people don’t generally call to see people who have taught them at school. You want to see Rose, don’t you?”

“Yes, madam,” said Val. “I came with the hope of seeing her—”

“Yes, yes—”

“But Mr. Atherley’s reply to my inquiry

was so singular, so startling, that I could not understand it at all."

"Ah, he feels so bitter against her because she disappointed all his expectations, and ended by marrying a young man who sings at the Music Hall in the Strand, and now sings there herself. It was a sad thing altogether. But to think of a man throwing off his own daughter for such a cause, as if she had disgraced him! He disgraces himself by such conduct, though I say it who should not."

"Rose is married, then?"

"Yes, my dear. I tell you, she married this young man; his name is Milburn. He is a very deserving young fellow, and I like him well enough now, though I used to dislike him excessively. But, after all, when young people will marry, where's the use of being so bitter against them? And she used to be his favourite, too, which makes it all the worse. It's a miserable affair altogether."

"I am very anxious to see Rose," said Val.

"Unfortunately she is in the country at present," answered Mrs. Atherley.

Disappointment after all.

"When will she return?"

"In a few weeks. If you will give me

your present address I will write to you, or most likely she will call upon you immediately on her return."

"Thank you. I am now staying at Radley's Hotel in the—yes, I am sure it is near the Blackfriars Bridge, or—I am not quite certain—"

"Oh, I know it perfectly well," said Mrs. Atherley.

"Well, when I am settled in other lodgings I shall write to you."

"Very well. I am glad to see any friend of my poor Rose. *I* have not cast her off, you may be very sure of that; but I dare not let my husband know that I still keep up any communication with my poor child. She is very happy, and quite pleased with her husband, and the Music Hall, and everything about her."

"I am glad to hear that. I hope it will not be many weeks before she returns."

"This is your child, I suppose, my dear?"

Val smiled, and answered in the affirmative.

"But tell me, my dear, how are you getting on? Is your husband with you in London?"

Val shuddered. "I must beseech you not to ask me anything with regard to my own

immediate affairs," she said, in a half-stifled voice.

Mrs. Atherley looked a little surprised at this, but did not say much more. They shook hands warmly, and parted.

An empty cab happened to pass at the moment. The driver, observing Val, held up his whip, and then stopped; she entered the vehicle, and drove away in the direction of Radley's Hotel.

As she was passing down Oxford-street, there was a temporary stoppage, caused by the fall of a horse in front of a rough hoarding round some new buildings. Val was therefore detained for many minutes. Once assured that she was in no danger, the novelty of the scene, the constantly-moving crowd, the bright windows, the bustle, afforded her some amusement, notwithstanding her wretched state of mind. Her attention was drawn to a man who was playing the harp. This man stood humbly by the kerb, playing unheeded—Orpheus playing to the brutes, only this time they resisted the fascinations of his performance; for they passed on, and gave no sign of even hearing. Yet there was a wild energy, an unearthly beauty, in his style of playing,

which might have struck fire from their flinty hearts. Perhaps had he played “Vilikins and his Dinah,” “The Postman’s Knock,” “Sheepskin and Beeswax,” or songs of that genre, the halfpence would have found their way to him; but the plebeian bits of copper apparently did not comprehend choice pieces from Mozart, Beethoven, or Haydn. Val was surprised to hear such refined performance in the street, but she was not able to listen for more than a few minutes, for the cab drove on. As she passed on, she heard the harp, joined by a cornet, strike into the lively strains of “Annie Laurie.”

The harpist was George Raymond; the cornet-player was his partner, Joe Abbiss.

CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Two or three days elapsed, and Val thought she must change her place of residence. She asked the landlady of the hotel where she could find lodgings at once respectable and moderate as to rent. The landlady "considered," then gave her *The Times* to examine; but Val, in her inexperience, was bewildered by the number she found in the advertising pages of that journal, and relinquished the search in despair.

As she was meditating, and wondering what she should do, and reflecting over the advisability of writing to Mrs. Atherley, one of the female servants entered the room. Out of the fulness of grief the heart speaketh; and Val confided to this honest-looking rosy-cheeked girl her difficulty about finding suit-

able apartments. The girl reflected seriously for a moment.

“ Well, ma’am, I tell you what. My cousin —she lives over Brixton way—it’s a nice place, and her name is Wilson. She isn’t my own cousin, exactly, you know, only she married Jack, who was my mother’s sister’s only son, and she’s a widow, and it seems more natural-like to say my cousin, and it’s a very comfortable place, I assure you, ma’am, with only three children, which don’t make much difference to you, as you’ve one yourself, and I think you’d like it.”

Val understood that she had a cousin who had apartments to let, so she asked what kind of house it was, and what was the rent.

“ Well, look here, ma’am, suppose you go over, and have a peep at the place, and see how you like it? I think that would do. You can go by the King’s Cross ’bus to Kennington or the Elephant, and then change, and it will only cost you sixpence one way, or sevenpence the other; or you can take a Paragon, or a Brixton, or you can have a cab, you know, only that would be more than five times the money. I’ll tell you the street and number. Ufton Road, number sixteen. It’s

rather a nice place, with nice tall house, and all that. I'm certain sure you'd like it, and she'll tell you all about the rent, and all that. What do you think, ma'am?"

Val took the girl's advice, went over to Brixton, saw the apartments—two quiet furnished rooms in a genteel private house in the Ufton Road—and finding that the rent was very moderate, engaged them, giving, as her reference, Mrs. Atherley. On her return to the hotel, she wrote to that lady, mentioning that she had given her as a reference, and telling her that she wished to be known by the name of Randolph, during her stay in London.

She left the hotel as soon as possible, and settled down quietly in her new quarters. These arrangements being completed, she had time to think what she should do for the future, though, being ignorant of the world's ways, she left everything to be subject to Rose's approval, having great faith in the superior knowledge and experience of her friend. She could not write to her, for she dared not place upon paper the dreadful thing which she had to tell; so she was fain to wait as patiently as she could.

Mrs. Wilson, her landlady, was a kindly,

cheerful woman, bustling and motherly. Val won her heart by honestly admiring her children, and by asking her advice with regard to Master Aubrey's health. From that time they were fast friends. There were other lodgers in the house, which was a tolerably large one, but of these people Val saw little.

Val reflected for a long time on what she should do. Her own income was so small now that she had to depend entirely upon it, that she must do something to add to it. She thought at first of needlework; but when she consulted Mrs. Wilson as to the best means of obtaining some to do, that good woman almost laughed in her face. She had informed Mrs. Wilson that she was a widow, without entering into any particulars on the subject of her past history.

Discouraged by what Mrs. Wilson said, Val turned her thoughts in another direction. Having received a first-rate education, she wondered if it would be possible to obtain a situation as a governess or teacher of any kind. She knew that the circumstances of her having a child—an "encumbrance"—would greatly militate against her being engaged, but she thought that if she offered to

make an abatement in terms, on condition of being allowed to keep Aubrey with her, she could manage to surmount that difficulty; or, perhaps, she might make something as a "visiting" teacher. Over the governess project she pondered for several weeks, until she had summoned sufficient courage to attempt to carry it into execution. The first step was to find the Countess Kartschkinskow, for she had no one else on whom she could rely for assistance, although there was very great doubt that the Countess took sufficient interest in her to help her.

She remembered that the night Madame Kartschkinskow had come into her room in the house of Lady Charrington in Carlton-house Terrace, she had written down her address. Unfortunately, Val had lost the piece of paper on which this address was written. After some consideration, she resolved to apply to Mrs. Wilson for assistance in this minor dilemma. She went downstairs to seek out the landlady, and found the good woman engaged in darning stockings in her back parlour.

"I wish to ascertain the address of a lady—her name is Madame Kartschkinskow"

she said, “and I don’t know how to discover it.”

“Why don’t you look in the Directory, or the Court Guide?” asked Mrs. Wilson. “What a queer name.”

“Ah, yes, I wonder I did not think of that. Where could I see one?”

Mrs. Wilson reflected.

“I think—let me see—to be sure. My stepson, Tom, will look when he goes to business in the morning.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilson. I don’t like to give trouble. Is there no other way?”

“Bless you, he won’t think it any trouble at all. Don’t mention it—it’s nothing at all.”

When Tom came home in the evening—he was eighteen, and was chiefly remarkable for having large hands and long legs—Mrs. Wilson called down Mrs. Randolph to ask her the name of the lady whose address she wanted to find. Val went down, and was a little disconcerted to find Tom at his tea; however, as neither Tom nor his stepmother thought anything of the interruption, Val could not refuse to enter the cosy back parlour.

She repeated the name of the Russian Countess, and was obliged to write it down.

As she was doing so she suddenly remembered that as Madame Kartschkinskow had come over with the object of claiming the title of Charrington, she might have succeeded in establishing her claim, and be called by that name also, or in lieu of her husband's. To obviate any mistake she wrote down both names, and then gave the paper to Tom, who promised to obtain the address, if it happened to be in the Directory or Court Guide.

The next evening Tom brought back the paper, having written opposite to the name of Kartschkinskow the address, "No. — Belgrave-square," and opposite to that of Charrington, "No. — Carlton-house Terrace." He explained that he had not found the name of Kartschkinskow alone, but the two names together in the Court Guide.

Val thanked the young man for his politeness, and the next morning set out about twelve o'clock to seek the Countess Kartschkinskow Charrington, leaving Aubrey in the care of Mrs. Wilson, who cheerfully undertook the charge.

The conductor of the omnibus civilly directed her when she alighted, and she easily

found her way to the house of which she had been in search.

For a moment she wavered now that she had arrived at her destination. Then she summoned up courage, and rang.

A stout, red-faced hall-porter answered her.

“I wish to—to see Madame Kartschkinskow,” she said, entering the magnificent hall.

There were two or three footmen lounging about. One of these dignitaries threw open the door of a small apartment for Val to enter, while another asked her for her card. She looked so elegant that, despite the fact that she had come on foot, they were impelled to treat her with respect. With a flutter of agitation she gave her card to the servant who demanded it, having taken the precaution to write beneath the name of Verner that of Raymond.

Her heart beat when she found herself alone, and she was almost sorry she had come. However, she had not time for indulging in any misgivings or forebodings, as in a few minutes the footman who had taken her card reappeared, and requested her to follow him. She passed up some flights of superbly carpeted stairs, through an antechamber, into a

boudoir fitted up with the most exquisite taste. Madame Kartschkinskow was seated on a couch, alone, but she rose when she saw Val.

“Ah, my young friend! I have not forgotten you. Come, sit down. I am glad to see you. How does it happen that you never called to see me before? You look pale and thin. How is that? Are you not happy?”

Val sat down, and Madame reseated herself.

“I see by your name on this card that you are married,” resumed the great lady. “Yet you do not look——” She hesitated, and an embarrassed silence ensued, which was broken by Val, who said frankly—

“I come to ask you to assist me. I have no friend to help me. I am placed in a most miserable position, and I do not know what you will say when you have heard my story. Perhaps you will never speak to me again.”

In a few rapidly uttered words, and without any interruption from the Countess, she told her miserable story. Madame listened in silence, and, when Val had finished, she asked, without making any comment on the recital—

“What will you do?”

“I can do nothing if you will not help me, madam. Oh! I shall feel so deeply grateful to you if you will assist me.”

“But in what way?”

“I want to—I thought of—I mean that I have been very carefully educated, and that I could—that I thought—indeed, I——”

“You want to be a governess? But—you have now a stigma attached to your name. You must be aware that nobody would permit you to remain in their house if they knew your real history; and I could not be a party to the concealment of it. I do not see how I can do anything for you.”

Val clasped her hands very tightly, without replying, and bent her gaze on the carpet. She grew a shade paler, and she compressed her lips. An ominous silence succeeded Madame Kartschkinskow’s speech.

“I hope, madam, you will pardon me for coming,” said Val, at length, in a tremulous accent. “I am totally alone in the world. Besides you, I have only one friend in the world—one of my old schoolfellows, and she is in the country. I have nobody to counsel me, or to assist me in any way. I am poor;

I am not destitute, because I have an income of between thirty and forty pounds a-year. But what difference does it make to anybody, if I have done nothing wrong, and if I can teach what I know, what difference does my unfortunate history make?"

Madame Kartschkinskow looked at her with a surprised air.

"Are you speaking seriously? You do not seem to realise your position. You——"

"I do—I do," cried Val, with vehemence. "But, can nothing be done? Am I to be utterly condemned as if—as if I were a wicked criminal? What have I done to be punished so heavily? Not realise my position?" She laughed bitterly. "What else do I think of, by day or by night? I am almost crushed by my misfortunes. I wish I could lie down and die, and so be at rest."

She covered her face with her hands, flung herself against the side of the couch, and, overcome by her emotions, broke into a tempest of crying. Madame Kartschkinskow did not interrupt her, thinking it more judicious to wait quietly while she sobbed and wept, than to seek to console her. At last Val regained her tranquillity, wiped off her

tears with her handkerchief, and sat up again.

“ My chief object in coming to you, madam, was not exactly to demand help from you, but rather advice. I am utterly alone in this vast city, with my little boy, and I know nothing of the place I am in, nor do I know what I ought to do. I feel that I am as helpless, and as ignorant of everyday life as a child—almost as helpless and ignorant as my poor Aubrey. What am I to do? Can you give me no advice, madam ?”

She spoke so pathetically that Madame Kartschkinskow was touched — painfully affected, indeed.

“ I will try to help you,” said the Countess, extending her hand, which Val clasped. “ Yet I do not see at this moment how it is to be done. It appears to me that for you to become a governess is out of the question. You must not think that I do not commiserate your most unhappy position. I will do what I can for you. I hardly know *what* I can do for you. I am so completely taken by surprise that—I feel very, very sorry for you, my poor child. I really and truly do not know what to do.”

She reflected deeply for some minutes. Val remained perfectly silent, waiting.

“ You can do needlework?”

“ I can.”

“ Fine needlework—I meant to say, fancy embroidery of different kinds?”

“ Yes, I can do almost any description of needlework.”

“ It is not very remunerative employment, and I am afraid would be rather difficult to obtain. But I will exert such influence as I possess, and I will myself give you work to do.”

As she spoke, Madame rang the bell, which was answered by a maid. The Countess murmured a few words in a low tone, and the girl quitted the room.

“ I shall not waste time in expressing the deep regret, the profound sorrow which I feel for the wretched position in which you are placed,” resumed Madame Kartschkinskow. “ It will be impossible to decide on the instant what can be done for you. Have you written to my sister-in-law, Lady Charrington?”

Val hesitated for some moments before replying. “ No, I have not written to her,” she at last answered, in a constrained manner.

“ You know that she is in Paris? Why have you not written to her? I should have imagined——”

“ I—because—I—we did not part on good terms.”

“ Indeed! How did that happen?”

The question was a disconcerting one, and Val did not reply. Fortunately she was saved from further embarrassment by the maid of Madame Kartschkinskow, who threw open the door, and announced that luncheon was ready. Madame Kartschkinskow rose, and desired Val to follow her. They went into an adjoining room, where they sat down at a table spread with various luxuries. Val tried to partake of the delicacies laid before her, but the attempt was a useless one, and it was with the utmost difficulty that she could be persuaded to swallow a glass of wine.

After some conversation it was agreed that Val should come again the next morning, when they could further consult as to what was to be done for her. This being settled, Val went away, with a sense of the most perfect unhappiness, and a heavy, sinking heart. She felt as if some new and terrible misfortune were about to befall her—something which would be

even more dreadful than what had already occurred, something which must crush her for ever. It seemed to her that she was walking in a dream—that everyone and everything around her were merely shadows. This additional vague apprehension of impending evil surrounded her like a cloud, from which she in vain strove to escape.

When she reached home her knock was answered by Mrs. Wilson herself, who told her that a lady had been waiting in the parlour some time to see her.

“A lady!” cried Val, rushing into the parlour, her heart beating violently.

Rose was sitting near the fire, waiting.

Val flung herself into Rose’s arms, and clasped her so tightly, that for a moment Rose was startled. Mrs. Wilson shut the door, and went away, leaving them together. Poor Val, on finding her friend thus unexpectedly, when she had not expected to see her for some time, was utterly overcome. She broke into a passion of tears, and continued crying until her slight form shook with the tempest of grief. Rose held her closely, without making any attempt to check her emotion; and the two stood thus for about five minutes. At

length Val released her friend, and kissed her two or three times.

“What is the matter, Val?” asked Rose, with a look of blank astonishment.

“Ah—I forgot—you don’t know. I did not write to you. How did you know I was here?—your mother told you, I suppose? Sit down, Rose, and I will tell you all.”

Rose sat down on the sofa, Val flinging herself beside her. She told Rose all that had happened; and Rose interrupted her almost at every sentence by ejaculations of astonishment and bewilderment. The story occupied a long time in the recital in consequence of the delay caused by these eager expressions; but at last Val paused, and laying her weary head on Rose’s shoulder, looked up at her with eyes half blinded by the tears which would rush into them in spite of all her efforts to control herself.

“This is a pretty state of affairs,” said Rose, finally. Val sighed heavily. “And I think you are the greatest fool I ever met with in my life—that is my candid opinion, if you want it particularly. Why didn’t you write to me before you acted in this ridiculous manner?”

“You—how do you mean?”

“I don’t believe one word of what that woman said—not one word. She told you an uncommon big—h’m—well, a big *lie*, in plain language. Don’t let us mince words. Do you believe that Aubrey Verner was capable of such wickedness—such atrocity? Do you—can you? You ought to have been the last to credit such a thing of him.”

Val shuddered, and pressed her arms round Rose.

“You don’t believe it?” she cried. “O, if I could only think that it—if I could wake, and find that I have been in a frightful dream! But why should she—why should that woman pretend that she was his—his lawful wife? What possible reason could she have for saying what she did?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell what her motive may have been. That puzzles me. Have you received a letter from him since?”

“He does not know that I have fled, and if he has written to me, his letter would be refused at the house, for they know nothing of me there now,” replied Val, in a low tone, and with a convulsive sob.

“Come, I pity you from the bottom of my heart; I couldn’t be more sorry for you. But

really some people make their own misfortunes. You condemn the man unheard. Now this is illogical and un-English. You believe a stranger against him——”

“But she had a letter written by him—she had his portrait, as I told you—she—”

Rose shrugged her shoulders.

“Very likely. I can’t fathom it. A letter might be forged—but a portrait—h’m. There is some influence at work against you. What it is, I cannot even conjecture. I feel as if I were walking in a fog, seeing things darkly, yet with their natural shapes distorted. I wish I had been near you when this evil business was coming on.”

“So do I—O, so do I. But what difference would that have made, after all? You could have done nothing.”

“I don’t know. I can’t understand the affair at all. You have changed your name, my mother tells me. I asked for you under the name of Randolph.”

“Yes. I did not wish to be discovered. I would like to hide myself from all the world. He shall never know of my being alive—I will never see him again, even if he looks for me, and seeks for me, which he will not—ah no.”

“If he wants to find you, he will in all probability go at once to—what is the name—where you draw your dividends?”

Val started.

“Ah!” she cried, drawing her breath with a sudden gasp, “what shall I do? I don’t want to see him any more. Oh, I never thought of that. And the worst of it is, I cannot—I *cannot* hate him. I ought to hate him, for he has not only ruined me, but fixed a stigma on my child. But I cannot—I cannot tear him from my heart. I love him—O, I still love him. But I will never, never see him again.”

Her friend, rising, walked to and fro for a few minutes, with her eyes bent on the floor, meditatively. Then she went to the glass, over the chimney-piece, and looked therein, arranging her collar; then she walked to the window, and looked out on the street, beating a tune on the panes. But not finding what she wanted—the idea she was in chase of—she returned to her seat, and announced the result of her cogitations.

“I can’t understand it at all.”

Val sighed deeply. “It does not need to be more understood than it is at present,” she replied, bitterly.

“Excuse me. May difference of opinion—ahem. What has become of this woman? What is her name?”

“I don’t know where she is.”

“She comes forward, makes a charge, and then—but no, it was *you* who disappeared.”

She jumped up again, and re-commenced pacing to and fro. Then she sat down again.

“Do you really believe that Aubrey Verner could have been capable of this villainy? Can you actually believe it? I don’t think that being in love with him, or being his wife, ought to induce you to be the first to credit any base accusation against him. To be sure, there are plenty of women who are the first to believe any bad stories against their husbands; but I did not imagine that *you* were one of that sort.”

Val pressed her friend’s arm so tightly that Rose nearly cried out.

“Do you—do you think it is not true? O, my God! if I could believe that that woman told me a falsehood, I could die with happiness.”

“I am confident she told you a malignant falsehood. The affair must be investigated.

But how—how, that is the question. I must think of that. We will wait till you receive a letter—that is the first step, if you may be said to take a step by standing still—rather an Irish mode of procedure."

"But I cannot receive his letter now, for it will be refused at the house where I—where I lived."

"You must write to Mr. ——, to your landlord, and ask him, as a favour, to call or send some one to the post-office the day your letter is expected. Stay, let me think. It is an awkward matter. When do you expect a letter?"

"I should have received one in about three weeks from this, if—if he wrote." A shiver ran through her frame as she spoke.

"If he wrote! Don't aggravate me, please. Of course, he would write, even if he acted as you fancy he did, as our distinguished friend, Mrs. Incognita, alleges he did; for he knows nothing of what has happened—poor fellow. I wish you hadn't been so precipitate. However, I can readily imagine what your feelings were. Well, I think the best thing you can do is to write civilly to your late landlord, and request him to claim your letter at the post-

office. When we read poor Aubrey's letter we can talk about this affair again."

"I am so glad I have seen you, my dear," said Val, shivering again. "You give me new courage and hope, and I thought both were dead in my heart. I must show you my child, my darling."

She ran out of the room, and presently returned with Aubrey in her arms.

"What a pretty dear," said Rose, "What lovely fair hair and blue eyes. Pretty pet. What is his name?"

Aubrey was rather shy, and declined the slight advances made by Rose, so she took no further notice of him, having some of the elements of diplomacy among her various characteristic qualities. He nestled up in his mother's arms, glancing with his large eyes at the visitor, and gradually becoming accustomed to her.

"Come, I must tell you something of what I have been about," said Rose, after a momentary silence.

"Ah! how selfish I am. I think of nothing but my own affairs. You are married, I know."

Rose laughed. "My ring might have told you that, if you had noticed it. Pretty badge of slavery; yet I am goose enough to like it," kissing it as she spoke. "My mother, I suppose, informed you? Yes, I am married. My husband is a comic singer at the Polyphonic Hall, and I am the prima donna. I have been married about a year. Papa was wild when I left the opera. But where was the use of keeping on like that—trying to play the grand? I know I sing tolerably well, but I am no more fit for grand opera than I am for being Empress of China. But he was really savage—perfectly savage; and we don't speak now."

"That is very dreadful," said Val.

Rose raised her eyebrows, and looked away, then said, carelessly, "Yes, it is rather lamentable—indeed, I might say, decidedly lamentable, not to add, distressing. Perhaps he will come round bye-and-bye. He was so terribly disappointed. I don't much like speaking of it. You must come and hear me, and I'll take you into the room where we assemble during the intervals of the songs. There is some fun to be made out of the place,

if you go with anybody who knows all about it; and I happen to be used to it, and pretty well tired of it. Will you come to-morrow evening?"

Val hesitated, but at length, pressed by Rose, agreed.

" You can come to my house, dine with us, and then I'll take you there in my brougham. It isn't exactly my brougham, as it is used by all the ladies of the place; but I call it mine, and it sounds nicer. It is agreed that you will come? I shall expect you about four o'clock. You will be sure to come, Val?"

" Yes. You will stay to dinner with me to-day, Rose? I have not a very sumptuous repast to offer you, but, such as it is, I should be very glad if you would stay."

" I cannot, my dear. I must be off directly."

" I am perfectly ashamed that I did not even ask you to take off your bonnet. I am growing very selfish, and indifferent to others. I do wish you could stay."

" I can't. I must go now. I have an appointment. Good bye, my dear child. Here is my address," drawing out a card as she spoke, and scribbling on it.

She kissed Val, and then kissed Aubrey, who did not offer much objection, merely burying his face on his mother's shoulder immediately after. Then she ran away, and Val went up to her own room, to meditate on what Rose had said.

CHAPTER III.

AN AMATEUR DETECTIVE.

THE next day Val, leaving Aubrey again in the care of her obliging landlady, went to Rose's house in Bentinck-street, Manchester-square. Rose called it her house, but she had no right to assume proprietorship over more than two drawing-rooms, a bed-room, and one or two chambers upstairs, where her maid and occasional visitors slept.

Rose received her with the utmost warmth, and made her race up to her bed-room to take off her bonnet and wrappers. Val felt all the better for being with this genial friend, whose spirits never failed, and who was so honest in her cordial sympathy.

They descended to the drawing-room immediately, and Rose wheeled over an immense arm-chair to the fire, ensconcing Val therein.

It was just the kind of apartment which one might imagine Rose would be mistress of. It was rather large, folding-doors separating it from the back drawing-room, and was furnished with such taste that a generally rich and glowing effect was produced. In the centre of the room stood a handsome circular table, carelessly scattered over with a variety of pretty ornamental trifles. Opposite to the windows was placed an open pianoforte, heaped up with music of every pretension, from sonatas by Mozart and Beethoven to "The Postman's Knock," "Billy Barlow," and "Johnny Sands." At the end of the room, opposite to the fire-place, was a superb cabinet, inlaid with looking-glass, which reflected every object around; close to the fire was a long, luxurious, one-armed sofa. Chairs, small tables, and different necessary adjuncts, with a handsome chimney-glass and a rich carpet, completed the furniture of the apartment. There was nothing prim, nothing slovenly, but over all was a certain air of comfort, and what might even be called profusion.

Val glanced round, and then sank back in her chair with a faint sigh. Rose pulled over a hassock, and placed it under her visitor's

feet, then sat down on the hearth-rug, before the sparkling fire, which had been lighted as the afternoon was a little chilly. A brief silence ensued.

“I have been thinking over what you told me the other day,” said Rose, at last. “It seems to me that there has been some plot against you, though by whom organised, I cannot even guess. Stop!” A sudden thought flashed across her mind. “Could it be that Lady Charrington takes this means of being revenged on you. Do you think the idea tenable?

Val’s eyes dilated.

“O, no; I think that is impossible. No one could be so cruel, so diabolical.”

“I don’t know. I will pursue the clue until I unravel this affair, or else, like that old king we used to read about at school, I’ll cut the knot across. This woman told you, when she first met you, that she had been in love with your father before she married her present husband. What is her name, by the way?”

“D’Arcy—at least she said so.”

“Ah—D’Arcy. Well, didn’t she say that about being in love with your papa?”

“Yes. She did say so.”

“She knew him in London?”

“She said so.”

“Come. She was in France, according to her own account, when she pretends Aubrey married her. What date was on the certificate she showed you?”

“I cannot remember—yes—the letters were burnt in on my brain. I ought to remember them. March 16, 1850. I recollect perfectly well.”

“And she said that she had known your father in London seven or eight years before she met you at——”

“Yes. She did say so.”

“Mind and be careful in your answers, for I want to put things together, as the Old Bailey lawyers do. I think, when everything else fails, and if this first essay is successful, I shall take up the detective line of business. Well, come, she is married now. She told you that at first?”

“Yes.”

“In 1850 she came to England with Aubrey. This is 1856. Seven or eight years before she encountered you—accidentally, she would wish it to appear—she knew your father in London. True, she might have come over

for a short time on a visit; but then, according to her story, she was a young and innocent girl, living in a quiet country town in France with her aunt, and had never stirred from her native place till she ran away with our poor maligned A. You never were much of an arithmetician, but I fancy any baby could tell that 1850 did not precede 1856 by eight years; and even if it did, it wouldn't be likely that she'd have time or inclination, while she was with him, to inaugurate a flirtation with anybody else; or when he was gone, to be ready to fall in love with another on the instant. It might be done if a person were particularly volatile, but it doesn't seem probable."

Val stared at her, and returned her triumphant glance with a look of bewilderment.

"I cannot understand it," she said at last.

"Neither can I; but this I can say with confidence, that it is my opinion that somebody has paid this woman to deceive you, or else she wants to be revenged on Aubrey for some cause. I think that Lady Charrington has something to do with it. You don't know what people are when they're in a rage."

“But then, what possible good could it do her—or whoever has thought of this plot?”

“What good would she derive from any misfortune happening to you?—yet, of course, she would be pleased to hear that ill-luck in any shape had befallen you. Besides——”

“This plot, if it is one, must be unravelled,” cried Val, passionately, “and then——”

“This woman wanted you to drink something, didn’t she?” resumed the incipient detective.

A sudden light flashed across Val’s countenance, and clasping her hands, she covered her face.

“No, no; it is impossible,” she muttered. “I am mad, I think.”

“Keep in your sober senses, please. What are we to do if you go on in that ridiculous manner? Ah, there is my husband. I know his knock. I hope you will like him. You must like him—you can’t help yourself. He is such a dear, good, darling—frank hearted—well, all sorts of a nice old boy. Here he is.”

She jumped up and ran to the door, which she threw open, and addressed some one who was ascending the staircase.

CRUEL FORTUNE.

“Val is here, Frank. Make haste. What a time you have been! You are tired. Why, you walk like an old man of seventy. I have been expecting you for the last—I don’t know how many hours. I began to think that you had ran away, and meant never to come back again.”

Mr. Milburn appeared at the door. Rose seized on him, kissed him with a certain degree of vehemence, and then, because he seemed disposed to reciprocate the salutation, slapped him on the cheek with her open hand, and began to lecture him.

“Don’t be silly. You know I don’t permit such a freedom. What a great goose you are. You never can learn to behave yourself properly. Come, I want to introduce you to Val.”

Val rose, and the usual embarrassing ceremony of introduction was performed, at the termination of which they all sat down. At this moment, some one closed the folding doors between the rooms, and immediately after there was a subdued rattling of plates, glasses, knives and forks, and similar implements.

Mr. Milburn was tall, with a well-made

figure and an agreeable countenance, with dark, pleasant eyes, and a reddish yellow moustache. He was quiet and gentlemanly in his manner, albeit there was perceptible a certain infusion of that which people term theatrical. He did not talk much, though he testified much interest in the dialogue carried on by the ladies. However, Rose made ample amends for his comparative silence.

Presently a servant appeared at the door, and announced that dinner was ready. Frank Milburn offered his arm to Val, and Rose led the way into the next room, where the table was laid for dinner.

It was a very pleasant dinner, although the company was limited. Rose was a most agreeable hostess, and Val could not resist the influence of her vivacity and rattling gossip.

“We are going to give up our present engagement, and take a better one—that is to say, a better paying one—at the new music hall which has been just opened. The proprietor’s name is, I think, Farley.” She looked at her husband, who nodded assent. “He is one of the vulgarest men you ever saw in your life, Val, but I believe he is immensely rich, and that makes up for everything—

doesn't it?" She looked again at her husband, who laughed. "He married a widow. I never saw her. They say she is a very fine woman. They will pay us well, as we have a name."

The servant who had waited on them cleared the table, but Rose did not leave the room. She drew her chair to the fire, signing to Val to do the same. In about half-an-hour, Frank announced that he had an appointment, and must be off.

"How tiresome you are. However, it doesn't matter. I am very glad to get rid of you. 'Bye—luckily I don't want anybody to take care of me."

She did not recur to the subject on which they had been speaking before dinner, but talked about light topics, in a careless way. At last she was startled by hearing the time-piece chime, and sprang from her seat in dismay.

"Good gracious!" she cried, "I had no idea it was so late! I must make haste. Wait till I send for you."

As she spoke she ran out of the room, unceremoniously. Val, leaning her cheek on her hand, looked into the fire, and reflected

on the theory which Rose had propounded—that the Frenchwoman had made her the victim of a conspiracy. She meditated, and at last she resolved that she would try to obtain Aubrey's letter, if he had written one.

“Ah, me!” muttered the poor young wife, clasping her hands above her head, despairingly, “what a mesh I am in. How weak, how helpless I am; I have no strength to resist Fate. Ah, me! how bitter is life—and I was so happy for a little time—so happy, oh so happy—and now—so miserable. I stretch out my hands, seeking for help, and I find only one friend in all the world.”

She looked about the room, and seeing a desk on a table near the window, crossed over, and opened it. She found paper, pens, ink, and envelopes, and sitting down, she wrote a letter, almost in terms of entreaty to Mr. Bossey, saying that she had been detained in London, and that she did not know what to do until she received a letter from her husband, and that if he would call or send to the local Post Office some time during the third week from the date of her missive, and ask for a letter for Mrs. Verner, and then forward it to

the care of Mrs. Milburn, she would be deeply obliged to him. She sealed this, directed it, and then put it in her pocket.

She was sitting by the fire again, when the servant opened the door, and requested her to go upstairs. Without speaking she followed the girl, and was presently in Rose's own apartment. Mrs. Milburn was nearly dressed, in the height of the fashion, in evening costume, and looked exceedingly handsome.

"Excuse me for leaving you solus such a length of time. Put on your things, Val, I am just ready. My brougham will be round in a few minutes. What a tiresome affair this bracelet is! If I were a man, I'm afraid I should swear. Don't look shocked. It will keep unfastening, and I don't want to lose it. There is a knock. See if that is the brougham, Susan? What a perfect nuisance this clasp is."

The servant ran down, returning in a very short time to inform her mistress that "the broom" had come. Rose enveloped herself in a heavy opera cloak, and went down stairs followed by Val, who had quietly put on her bonnet and mantle. Rose desired her friend to get in, and then settled herself comfortably on the opposite seat.

In a few minutes they were at the place of their destination. There was the usual crowd assembled to see the *prima donna* alight and run into the brilliant temple of music and festivity. Val followed Rose closely, and presently found herself in a spacious, well-lighted room, lined with mirrors, where she was at first so dazzled that she could scarcely distinguish anything. By degrees, however, she was able to descry objects, and to notice the general aspect of the room. It was furnished with careful regard to elegance and luxury, and a glittering chandelier, depending from the ceiling, diffused a glow of light through the apartment. Lounging about were a great number of splendidly dressed people, the women chiefly in evening attire, the men generally in some fantastic costume. The ladies were either contemplating themselves in the mirrors—touching their eyebrows, smoothing or crinkling their hair, shaking out their skirts, practising an attitude—or else engaged in a flirtation more or less absorbing.

Rose made her way to a distant corner of the room, to a sofa, where she told Val to sit down. Having secured a comfortable situation for her friend, she crossed over to a group of three

showily-dressed girls, and shook hands with them, speaking a few words at the same time. She spoke to some of the others, nodded cavalierly to some of the men, and then came back to Val.

“ You must make yourself as comfortable as you can for the present. I can’t take you into the gallery to-night, as I am in full dress. There are a great many people here this evening. Some of them are queer folks. You see that young woman opposite?—the one who is trying to get a look at her back hair—well, she sings all our tender love ditties, and does the sentimental. I believe half the young men who come every night are desperately in love with her. At home, I have every reason to believe, she isn’t an example of Griseldian meekness; she thrashes her mother, henpecks her husband, and pinches her children.”

“ I do not like to hear of such people,” said Val.

“ Don’t you? I shan’t tell you any more stories, then. Do you see that tall thin person by the fire?—just imagine, he is a detective in the day time. Do you see that little fellow—that short stout one with the red face, I mean—he is in the habit of writing little simpering

bits of songs (both music and words); and at one time, being better off as regards this world's gear than he is at present, and being supremely anxious to be placed conspicuously before the public, as an author and composer, he absolutely paid the entire expenses of old Joe Eldridge's concerts for the sake of having his pieces sung, and having his name in the programme as the progenitor of the wretched little bantlings. True, I assure you. It didn't do him much good, for nobody went to the said concerts except about a dozen printers' boys, who were given orders, and who didn't buy programmes, or even read the bills. There's old Joe himself, coming in at the door. You know they say, 'talk about'—'hem—'and you'll see'—'h'm."

Val turned. The man who entered was the personage who had been introduced by Braxford to Mrs. Farley, the night Raymond had sought out his old coadjutor. At this moment, Rose was summoned to appear on the platform, and she hastily left the room. Val felt nervous and uneasy at first on finding herself alone in this crowd, but presently she forgot her tremors in the interest created by the movements of the people surrounding her.

The person who was known by the appellation of Eldridge, made his way quietly towards a good-humoured looking young man who was leaning against the chimney-piece, close to Val, and who had hitherto amused himself by admiring his pretty neighbour. Eldridge seized this young man by the sleeve, and addressed him in an earnest tone.

“My dear fellow, I am regularly up a tree—I’m in a deuce of a fix. I don’t know what to do.”

“What’s the matter?” asked the young man, lazily.

“Look here—I’m giving a concert for my own benefit in St. Acre’s Hall, and I advertised a fellow to sing, and he won’t appear unless I pay him the two guineas I promised him. Well, you know, that’s impossible—I mean that I can’t give it to him; you know I never had an idea that he would be so deuced stiff about it, and I’d like to know where I could get two guineas to hand over to him. The fellow must imagine I’m one of the Directors of the Bank of England. It’s really too bad of him to turn nasty like that—now isn’t it? I put it to you. So I must make a speech to the audience, you understand.”

“ Well, go and make your speech, and don’t bother me. You don’t want me to call a cabinet council, and draw it up for you, do you?”

“ No, no, my *dear* fellow. But now, it *is* awkward. I can’t go on without a dress coat, and—I popped it the other day, and I haven’t got a farthing to release it. If you *could* lend me half a sov., I should be everlastingly obliged to you, my *very* dear fellow.”

“ Lend? You mean give.”

“ Now that isn’t fair. You know I’m the very soul of honour—that——”

“ Bosh!”

“ For old friendship’s sake—I assure you——”

The young man shrugged his shoulders, put his fingers in his waistcoat-pocket, drew out something, and gave it to the petitioner, who was about to pour forth a torrent of thanks and promises of speedy repayment, when the other abruptly and rather uncivilly cut short his speech, and he went hurriedly off.

In about twenty minutes Rose came back, and sat down beside Val. Just as she seated herself, a tall, large woman entered. A look of anger crossed Rose’s face.

“There’s that detestable Mrs. O’Connor. I abhor that woman. Upon my word, Val, I could sometimes knock that woman’s head off. She is our comic singer. She doesn’t sing to-night, so you wont have an opportunity of hearing her. She always wants to patronize me, and takes such airs on herself, that sometimes I fall into such a rage I can hardly refrain from setting my arms a-kimbo, and fighting it out with her, Billingsgate fashion. I’ll tell you what—I’ll put you under her charge, as she is not dressed for going on, and you can trot round into the gallery and hear the performance. What say you?”

Rose waited until the new-comer had advanced sufficiently near to be within the range of her eye. Then she left her seat, and going up to the individual on whom she had bestowed such objurgation, held out her hand with a warmth which surprised Val, remembering the sentiments to which she had just given utterance.

“Ah! my dear Mrs. O’Connor, how do you do? Delighted to see you, I’m sure. You look charming to-night.”

“Oh! how d’ye do, me deer? You are a little flatterer, telling me such lies to me very

face. I'm not meself at all this evening, and that's the truth. I'm afraid I've caught a bit of a nasty cold. I was walking in the Pork this afternoon, and I feel—I don't know how, and that's the truth."

"I want you to do me a favour."

"Is it a feever? Why, then, just tell me what it is, and if it's in the power of Grace O'Connor to do it, say it's done."

"You see my friend here—"

"A swate pretty creeter she is, too. Well?"

"I should feel so much obliged if you would take her into the gallery. I want her to hear the singing."

"With the greetest pleasure in life, me deer."

Rose hastily performed the ceremony of introduction, and Mrs. O'Connor extended a large fat hand to the young lady, then hooked the delicate fingers over her own stout arm, and walked off with her without further parley. She led her very quickly through the hall into the gallery, telling her to put down her veil, and setting the example herself. They went into one of the front rows, where they had a good view of the platform.

Val glanced round, dazed by the light, the

unusual noise and bustle, and the entire novelty of the scene. The platform was occupied by the young man who had been lounging near her. He was dressed in evening costume, and held a sheet of music in his hand, from which he was singing. The accompanist was a small, thin, miserable man, whose age it would have been impossible to guess, and who had red eyes, a red nose, and a red moustache. Val then looked at the orchestral performers, who were seated in a perfectly tranquil manner, perfectly inattentive to what was going on ; and lastly she looked round at the audience, which was chiefly composed of young men, who were all well dressed, and women who were arrayed in a very showy style, and who laughed loudly, and stared about them with bold, unabashed eyes. She turned again to the stage. The song was just come to a conclusion, and the singer presently withdrew. He was succeeded by an extraordinary object, who was received with the most vehement applause—applause that rang through the hall, and obliged the recipient to wait for a hearing. This individual was attired in a long-tailed coat, ragged at every possible part that it could be torn, short red breeches, long blue-gray stock-

ings, immense brogues, a high shirt-collar—singularly white—a scarlet crop of hair, and a gray felt hat. In his hand he carried a huge stick, which was intended to represent a shillelagh, as his costume was intended to denote that its wearer was a native of the Emerald Isle.

This personage, the prelude on the piano-forte ended, commenced by a wild shriek, which was supposed to be a correct imitation of the howl in use at Donnybrook Fair. Then he talked, with a brogue which might have been the appropriate accent of any country but poor injured Ireland; and then he went on to sing something about “the boys,” and “the gurls, sir!” and “the races,” and a “neat shebeen;” and “a shillelagh,” interspersed with a good many “whack fal lals” and “faixes,” occasionally varied with an “arrah!” or a “sure, sir.” All this being accompanied by a never-ceasing volley of winks, his mouth being distended almost from one ear to the other; and the piece was ended by the same wild shriek with which it had been commenced.

This song so much delighted the audience that they vociferously re-demanded it. The singer, who modestly withdrew on the termination of his song, returned with an affected

simper, and began amid breathless silence another Hibernian ditty.

Val, who could hardly understand all this tomfoolery, turned to Mrs. O'Connor, and asked her who this great favourite was.

“Sure, and don’t ye know? Well, now, that flogs. Why, don’t you know Frank Milburn, the husband of your friend Rose?”

Val stared at her in bewilderment.

“Perhaps you’ve never seen him in costume. If so, that accounts.”

Val was astounded. What! this extraordinary howling creature was the quiet, gentlemanly young man with whom she had dined in her friend’s company that very evening? Impossible! She was, however, too polite openly to contradict Mrs. O’Connor.

The next singer she knew. It was Rose, led on by a gentleman in evening dress, who was to sing a duet with her. Val listened with new surprise to the rubbish which they uttered, and could scarcely believe that Rose would descend so far as to sing such trash. The more she listened, the more she was astonished; the words, the music, were beneath contempt. However, the audience seemed to like both exceedingly, and applauded vociferously.

When Rose had finished, Val begged of Mrs. O'Connor to re-conduct her to the room which she had left a short time before. Mrs. O'Connor obligingly led her back to the side of her friend, and, with the most cordial farewell to Mrs. Milburn, left immediately after.

Val expressed her surprise at the extraordinary appearance Mr. Milburn had presented on the platform in unsophisticated language. Rose laughed heartily.

“ You were astonished, little goose? Why, he gets thirty guineas a week for doing that. It’s well worth while, isn’t it?”

Soon after the brougham arrived for Rose. She wrapped herself again in her opera-cloak, signed to Val to follow her, and quitted the Hall, making a rapid flight into her carriage before the enraptured eyes of the crowd of assembled ragamuffins near the door.

They were not at home more than half an hour before Frank appeared. He was then dressed very simply, and had resumed his usual tranquil, gentlemanly air. Supper was served immediately on his arrival, and on its conclusion, Val intimating that she wished to depart, Rose led the way upstairs.

As Val was putting on her bonnet, she sud-

denly recollected the letter which she had written before going out with Rose. She told Rose of the freedom she had used in writing on some of her paper, and having easily obtained forgiveness for taking such a liberty, lamented that she had omitted to post it, as she was very anxious it should reach its destination as soon as possible.

“It will not be posted now before morning,” she said, dolorously.

“Yes it will,” answered Rose, flying to a small cabinet, which she opened, taking therefrom a postage-stamp. “Give me your letter.” Val did so. “See, I am going to perform the simplest of legerdemain tricks—one which will not demand the skill of a very learned prestidig—dig—what is that hard word? Never mind. Hey, presto! I attach the stamp—so: I ring the bell—so. Susan immediately appears, and your letter disappears.”

In fact, the maid did appear almost instantly.

“This letter to the post, directly. It is of the utmost importance that it should be posted as soon as you can fly to the chemist’s at the corner of the street,” said Rose, gravely.

Val protested against this hurry, as she was

unwilling to give so much trouble; but Rose silenced her, and the girl disappeared, shutting the door.

“Hush!” said Rose, suddenly, as if listening. “There is that man who plays the harp every Thursday evening outside the Montpellier Arms. Doesn’t he play wonderfully well for a street performer? Listen.”

She threw up the window and leaned out. Val advanced and listened also. The sound of a harp, played in a wild weird style, as if all the demons in the night air were taking it in turn to shower electric sparks from the strings, met her ear.

“He is an extraordinary looking man,” continued Rose, looking round at Val. “I have sometimes seen him as I have passed. Sometimes he frightens me to see him with his head bent down, his thick eyebrows casting deep shadows on his cavernous eyes, and the veins in his forehead raised like cords, as if he were always thinking of hanging. I expect to see him ride off on his harp in a cloud of sulphurous flame, like the Demon Huntsman in Bürger’s poem.”

Val’s thoughts flew back to the day when she had been told the story of her early life

by Lady Charrington. "Lady Charrington told me that my father was a street player," she thought, with a shiver.

She was meditating as to the propriety of imparting the secret of her parentage to Rose, but a moment's reflection assured her that there was no necessity for speaking of it, and she did not know how Rose might receive the information. As she was thinking, Rose closed the window.

"It is growing late, my dear. I should like to keep you here as long as possible, but I must not be selfish," said Rose, kissing her.

It was past eleven when Val reached home. She was tired by the excitement of the evening, and consequently passed a very uneasy, feverish night, haunted by singular, and often painful, dreams.

CHAPTER IV.

ROSE PLAYS AT NURSING.

A FORTNIGHT passed, and then Val received a hurried note from Madame Karschkinskow, telling her that she was utterly unable to do anything for her, and that as she (the Countess) was leaving England, she should not be in a position to assist her in any way. There was a strange air of constraint over the few words which this note contained—a singular embarrassment perceptible, which puzzled Val. She showed the note to Rose the next time she saw her. Rose read it two or three times, and then looked at Val with an ironical smile.

“ My opinion is,” she remarked, “ that she has seen or written to my Lady Charrington, and that your old mistress—say your old enemy—has forbidden her, on pain of her

displeasure, from helping you. Did Madame know that you had had a row with my lady?"

"I think not. I do not think it is likely Lady Charrington would tell her."

"Depend upon it, then, that I'm right. She must have spoken to or written to Lady Charrington about you, and asked my lady's advice or opinion on the subject; and this is the result."

She laughed again, contemptuously, derisively.

A day or two after this a letter, directed by Rose, was handed to Val by Mrs. Wilson. She tore it open, and saw within an envelope bearing the postmark of Ashford. She nearly fainted when she saw this, and it was many minutes before she dared to break the seal. Little Aubrey was in her arms, and she sat down, placing him in her lap. At last she gained sufficient courage to open the envelope, on the inside of which were the words, "With the Compts. of W. Bossey." On the envelope which was within this again she saw the familiar writing of her husband.

Say, rather, of the man who had so cruelly deceived her into the idea that she was his wife—his true and legal wife. The tears

welled up in her eyes until the characters ran one into another, and she could see nothing but a burr of white paper covered with hieroglyphics.

“This is simply weakness,” she muttered. “Shall I never gain strength? Shall I always be a poor, despondent, childish creature, unfit for everything, unable to take care of myself or of this baby, who is scarcely weaker than I am?”

Dashing the tears from her eyes, she broke open the last remaining envelope, and took therefrom the packet of thin letter-paper, closely covered with the writing of Aubrey Verner. The letter was full of the kindest, most affectionate expressions, and contained a lively sketch of everything that had happened on his journey and on his arrival in China. He had evidently tried to impress her with the idea that he did not yield to any depression of spirits, yet there was a pervading tone over the letter which plainly told her what he must actually suffer from the separation.

She read and re-read this, and kissed the paper twenty times with an impulse of passionate fondness. It was impossible that the

writer of these tender lines could be so wicked, so heartless, as she had been led to believe. Oh no, it was impossible!

With trembling hands she dressed Aubrey for going out, and then put on her bonnet and shawl. Taking the child in her arms, she quitted the house, with the intention of seeking Rose. On gaining the street she felt so giddy that she could scarcely walk, and with difficulty tottered to the corner where the omnibus passed, and then got into the vehicle.

Rose was absent when she reached her house, but Val sat down in the drawing-room and waited. At the end of an hour, which seemed an interminable time to Val, Mrs. Milburn came in, bright and smiling, like some guardian angel. Val, without speaking, placed the letter in her hands.

“Ah, he has written, then? I knew he would—I *knew* he would. I felt perfectly sure of it. Heaven be praised! and it isn’t often I’m thankful for anything. Let us see what he has said.”

She read the letter deliberately, as if weighing every expression—as a judge might read a letter bearing important evidence on a case. When she had finished she looked at the face

of her poor friend, which was alternately flushing and paling.

“ You do not believe that he has done the wickedness of which he was accused ? ” There was a strange mixture of tenderness and sternness in her voice.

“ No,” murmured Val. “ No, I *cannot* believe it.”

“ I am glad of that. We shall unravel that infamous plot by-and-bye.” She folded up the letter and returned it to Val. “ I wish you had not run off in that helter-skelter way when the accusation was made. I wonder where that woman is. What a black-hearted devil she must be ! What are you going to do now ? ”

“ I don’t know,” answered Val, helplessly.

“ You will write to him ? ”

“ I—shall I ? Ought I ? ”

“ Decidedly you must write to the poor fellow. What ! first you say you don’t believe the accusations made against him, and then you say ‘ Shall—ought I ? ’ Ach ! you irritate me. Come, here is some foreign letter-paper. Sit down and write now—now, this instant.”

“ I cannot. Oh ! I cannot. My head is swimming round. There are black and red

spots floating before my eyes, and I have a dreadful headache. I am scarcely ever without a headache now."

Rose looked at her, and the idea occurred to her that an illness was impending over the unfortunate young wife.

" You ought to write at once—you really ought, my dear child. I beseech you to write now—do, there's a dear—even a few lines."

" I cannot, I tell you, Rose. I really cannot. I feel so—so—I hardly know how. I must get home, for I feel so tired, so perfectly tired."

It was useless pressing her, and she soon after took her leave, much against Rose's wishes. How she reached home, she scarcely knew. She had staggered into an omnibus, then got to Ufton Road the best way she could. On gaining her room, she put Aubrey quickly to bed; then she took off her bonnet shawl, and, feeling ineffably weary, she finally lay down without undressing.

Soon she felt tormented by a fierce thirst—a wild longing for some liquid to cool her burning tongue; she tossed from side to side, unable to find rest, for ever wandering amidst arid deserts, where the sun seemed pouring

down remorseless rays on her head—haunted by shadowy phantoms, which she in vain tried to escape from, amid a Cimmerian gloom. Spectres gibbered at her with frightful visages—one especially, which fluttered round and round her, laughing and jeering at her as a disgraced outcast. Then she fancied that Lady Charrington came to her bedside and triumphed over her, with cruel laughing and jeering, saying innumerable bitter cutting things; and then she would hide her face, and cry like a wailing child.

After a while she thought she had wandered into a garden, full of sweetness and beauty. She was so pleased by this, that she sat down, as she fancied, on a grassy bank, and lay back, dreamily.

And then she looked up, and found that she was lying in bed, and that it was night instead of radiant day.

“I must have been dreaming,” she murmured. “It was pleasant. I had forgotten all about my misfortunes. I ought not to have left the gas burning. It was very careless. I must extinguish it. What a peculiar smell of herbs and vinegar, and eau-de-cologne!”

She tried to rise, but found she was almost

unable to move. This discovery was alarming. She uttered a faint cry. In an instant the curtain was drawn a little further back, and the face of Rose presented itself, to the astonishment of Val, who uttered another cry in her surprise. She began to think she must still be asleep and dreaming. This idea was dispelled by the perfectly real sensation of Rose's touch on her forehead and hands, and of Rose's kiss on her cheek, and Rose's unintelligible murmuring, apparently of thanksgiving.

Val looked up, helplessly bewildered.

"How is it that you are here? Why am I —have I been ill?"

"Very ill, my child," said Rose, in an unsteady voice. "Dangerously ill. We feared you would not recover,—but now you are past danger," she added, cheerfully, "for our friend Dr. Campbell—but you must not talk. You must not even think."

"Have I been ill for a long time?"

"Just eighteen days. Don't talk too much. Are you comfortable?" Rose moved the pillows, and arranged the clothes.

"Where is my boy, Aubrey?"

"About fifty-one miles from this—in the

country. He is in good hands, with an old servant of mamma's, who has little ones of her own, and knows all about it."

"I know it must be right or you would not say so, Rose. How does it happen that you are here?"

"Oh, for a simple reason enough. I am taking my turn at playing nurse. I wanted to have you removed when you were first taken ill, but Mrs. W. has been seized with some sort of absurd fancy for you, and would not hear of such a thing, and has been going on like a mother to you ever since. She is a nice woman in her way. But really now, you must *not* talk, or I'll put out the light and go away, and leave you all by yourself with Bogie."

"Oh, Rose, just one thing more. I can hardly realize this. How did you hear about my illness?"

"Mrs. W., finding you were delirious, fished about in your drawers till she discovered a card or something with my name written thereon, and sent off a message post haste. Though she might have saved herself the trouble, as I was coming the next day. There, go to sleep directly. I am not going to be

scolded by the doctor just because you choose to be unmanageable."

"Rose, I am so hungry!"

"Are you? Well, wait."

Presently Rose gave her some tea and a little morsel of thin dry toast, which Val devoured with the keen appetite induced by long abstinence.

This frugal meal finished, Val lay back supinely, until a sudden thought struck her.

"How does it happen that you are here, Rose? I mean, how are you able to spare time?"

"Well, it happens that it is Sunday night, that's all. I wish you would keep quiet and not go on chattering. It is perfectly intolerable, and I won't allow it."

"Don't be angry, Rose. But——"

"Well, I'll tell you all about it, and then you really must go to sleep. Mrs. Wilson has been your chief nurse; I come during the day, and sometimes at night. When you were at the worst, I got a week's holiday, and stayed with you all the time——"

"Dear, dear Rose——"

"Bosh! Don't make a fuss. Now, are you satisfied? If you are, please say so, and go to

sleep at once; and if you are not, say nothing, but go to sleep all the same, and wait until some other time for further explanations—which you won't receive, I can promise you."

The tears came into Val's eyes as she thought of the disinterested kindness of her friend, who affected to speak so roughly. She did not answer, but closed her eyes, and, being exhausted, in a little while obeyed the injunction as to sleep.

Days elapsed before she was strong enough to leave her sick couch. All this time, Rose was unremitting in her attentions; and Mrs. Wilson, too, was so kind that Val was unable to find words to express her sense of gratitude. She had never imagined that she had made so profound an impression on the heart of the good widow. Some weeks passed, and she was permitted to venture out a short way, generally supported by the arm of Rose.

When she was strong enough to bear being talked to on subjects of immediate interest, Rose asked her if she had written the letter to Aubrey; and made her write it then. Val was at first unwilling to write it, for she dared not write without letting him know what had happened; but she was finally persuaded to

write a simple account of what had occurred, and to demand some explanation. She abstained from any expressions of either anger or fondness, limiting herself to a mere statement of facts. The letter written, Rose posted it.

It was a day of great rejoicing when Val was able to reach the house of her friend. Rose had made some excuse not to sing that night, and had invited her sister Floretta and her husband to tea ; so that there was a very merry little party, Frank being at home half the evening. Floretta was exceedingly kind in her manner, and, with her quiet, graceful softness, speedily won the liking of the invalid.

After tea, during a lull in the lively chatter which was carried on, Frank took up the evening paper. He had scarcely opened it when he uttered an exclamation—almost a cry—and starting up, left the room, taking with him the paper. The startled group looked at each other.

“ What can be the matter ? ” said Floretta.

“ I don’t know, ” said Rose, who had turned pale. “ Do not take any notice.”

Presently she disappeared, and in about a quarter of an hour came back, still looking

pale, yet with a certain air of relief. She glanced at Val two or three times, when Val's head was averted, but in answer to the inquiries of Floretta, she would not give any satisfactory reply.

Rose had arranged that Val should stay all night, as she was too weak to be trusted out late, and it was now cold weather.

The next morning, after breakfast, Rose said, in a very low tone,

“Val, I want to tell you something. I don't know whether you are strong enough to bear the news, but you must learn it sooner or later, and I fear that some one may tell you unexpectedly, and do you more harm by startling you than I might do by informing you now, quietly and simply.”

Val looked at her. “What is it?”

“In the first place, I am afraid we have lost all the money we—Frank and I—placed in the hands of our bankers. It is very stupid to save money when you earn it. Live a short life and a merry one. For the future, I'll spend every farthing I make. I might as well have had the satisfaction of making ducks and drakes of my own cash, instead of

having it thrown into the dirt by other people. Vexatious!"

" You have lost your money? How?"

" What I am going to say concerns you more than it does me. Will you tell me what arrangement did A. make about your income? Didn't he arrange that you were to receive part of his pay as a captain of hussars?"

" Yes," answered Val, in a husky voice, " he arranged with an army agent in Pall Mall that—that I was to draw half his pay every month. He said he could easily afford to do that, as his uncle knew he could not live on his pay, and had acted very liberally in giving him money. But I will never touch a farthing belonging to him until I am certain about—"

" But if you were reduced to the utmost necessity—if you lost all your own little property, what would you do? Play the heroical at the cost of your dinner? You could not let little Aubrey starve, I suppose, or go about with his poor little tootsies peeping out from the tips of his boots—eh?"

" I don't know what you mean."

" The firm where Frank and I placed our money has failed—the firm of Osborne,

Wyburd, and Dauncey has come to a tremendous smash."

She looked at Val, expecting to see her fall back in a swoon, and was surprised to see that she merely turned a shade paler.

"That was what Frank saw in the paper yesterday. He did not know anything about your capital being in their hands, but he was horrified about himself and sposa. However, it doesn't signify about us—we can make plenty more. What will you do?"

"I don't know," said Val, who was stunned by this new misfortune.

"Have you any money by you?"

"Yes—no—I have a hundred pounds, produced by the sale of the furniture in—in his house; but I could not touch that, you know. I am keeping it until I can give it into his hands."

"What is to be done? You are, then, on the verge of being destitute? I am obliged to speak plainly."

"Is it certain that this bank has failed?"

"Certain? I should think it was. As certain as print in the public newspapers can make it; and, to make the thing more sure, Frank went before breakfast this morning to

see about it, and found that old Osborne has been arrested, and Wyburd has run away, I don't know where. Dauncey is in India, so they can't get at him."

Val clasped her hands before her face, and did not utter another word. Rose walked to and fro uneasily.

"Doing anything in the governess-way is out of the question," she said at length, stopping abruptly; "needlework is only nonsense, and I don't know of anything else that is to be had. But you certainly can't starve, and, above all, you can't let young Aubrey starve. You won't take anything from your husband because of this whim you have taken into your precious old noddle. There is only one thing for you."

"What is that?" asked Val, raising her head.

"Why, you have got a fortune in your throat, if you would only use it, my child."

"I could not do it. Aubrey would not like it."

"Why, I thought you never meant to see or speak to him again? What does it signify what he thinks if he isn't your husband? Better think of what little Aubrey's feelings will

be, instead of tormenting yourself about what t'other may say or think."

"I certainly cannot see my child suffer, and I certainly will never accept the smallest favour at the hands of Aubrey until I am sure of—that I am his wife in reality."

"Well, there it is. See, my father would be delighted to have the opportunity of bringing you out. Do not tell him that I said anything about it; but go to him and talk to him. Will you take my advice? He will be delighted, I tell you. What else can you do? Besides, you need not appear under your own name."

Val reflected for some time. It was true, nothing else was to be done, and she had her child to provide for. The more she reflected, the more she saw the necessity of doing something, and at once. She was growing stronger every day, and must not lose time in pursuing her search for some occupation which would enable her to live. There was no hope now that Madame Kartschkinskow would assist her; she knew no one, she had a blight, she thought, on her name.

"I am selfish, Rose," she said, looking up.
"I think nothing of your loss——"

“And very properly—think of yourself first,” interrupted Rose, sharply. “We’ll soon redeem our loss. What conclusion are you coming to?”

“I think I will accept your advice.”

“There’s a sensible dear,” said Rose, kissing her. “Go and see my father as soon as possible; but don’t say a word about me. It would only irritate him, and do me no good. Well, I really am glad that we have begun to see our way more clearly.”

“And—I *do* want my boy again,” said Val, with a pleading air. “I am pining to see his darling face once more.”

This wish was easily gratified. Aubrey arrived at her lodgings in a day or two, looking more rosy and plump than ever.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

DURING the week which Val took to consider her future proceedings, Mrs. Wilson informed her that she would have to look out for some other lodging, as she, Mrs. Wilson, was about to break up housekeeping.

“ My brother, who lives in Sydney, has lost his wife,” she said, “ and he writes to ask me if I should like to go out, and take charge of his house and children, and take my boys out there. I’m sorry, too, I must say, to leave England for ever; but my brother has long wanted me to go out there, and I cannot refuse. Not but what I’m glad to go, too. It will be such a good thing for the boys, you know; and, after all, I’ve got to think for them, and not for myself.”

Val, who now liked Mrs. Wilson very much,

and who wished to stay in this house, was sorry to hear of the intended departure of her landlady. She told her what she thought, and expressed in graceful terms her regret, and her sense of obligation for her kindness.

“Oh, don’t mention it, I beg,” cried Mrs. Wilson. “I’m sure, whatever it is in my power to do, in the way of any little friendliness, I’m glad, heartily glad, to do. And I’m sure I’m sorry, too, that I’ll never have the chance to see you again.”

She was to go at the end of three weeks, she said. Rose proposed that Val should stay at her house until she could suit herself. Rose also suggested that she and Val should accompany Mrs. Wilson, the morning of her departure, to the Euston Square station, where a lady, with two children, who were also proceeding to Sydney, were to meet her, by the kind arrangement of a mutual friend.

Any parting must of necessity be sad, but where there is almost an absolute certainty that those separated will never meet again, there is an additional melancholy. Val, and Mrs. Wilson too, felt this on the morning appointed for the commencement of the journey to be undertaken by the latter. The drive to

the station was accomplished in silence, which none were disposed to break. They reached the terminus some time before the train started, and were obliged to walk to and fro, waiting; for the lady who was to accompany Mrs. Wilson had not yet appeared. Mrs. Wilson was personally unacquainted with this lady—Mrs. Longley—who had been introduced to her by letter, as there was no time whatever to make a more satisfactory arrangement; and she was to recognise her by description.

“I fear your friend will not come in time,” observed Rose, when they had been walking up and down some time.

“I am afraid not,” answered Mrs. Wilson. “It doesn’t signify much; but still I should like to be with some one who knows something of my friends. It would make the voyage seem less lonely. I’m afraid she won’t come.”

There was every reason to think so, for at length the bell rang, every one took their places, and Rose and Val were standing at the door of the compartment in which Mrs. Wilson was seated, exchanging a last farewell with her and her boys, when a lady, dressed in dark-coloured garments, and accompanied by

two little girls, appeared hastening along the platform, preceded by a guard.

“Oh, Mrs. Milburn, please,” cried Mrs. Wilson, quickly, “I am certain that is—— Please ask her if her name is Longley.”

The lady caught her words, and ran up. It was Mrs. Longley, and Mrs. Wilson anxiously begged her to get into the carriage.

“Good-bye, dear Mrs. Randolph,” said Mrs. Wilson, turning again to Val.

“Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Wilson. My best wishes attend you,” answered Val. By a mutual impulse, they threw their arms round each other, and exchanged a farewell kiss.

As she was drawing back, Val felt her arm suddenly seized with a grip. Looking round, she saw Rose, quite pale, pulling down her fall.

“My father!” cried Rose, in an undertone. “I would not have him see me for the world. What *shall* I do? I would not for five hundred pounds that he saw me. Let us escape into the waiting-room. Quick, quick, quick!”

Mr. Atherley, who was accompanied by a young girl, happening to look towards the two ladies, recognised Val, and bowed. He either did not or would not see who her com-

panion was, but almost immediately turned away his head. Rose hurried along the platform and escaped, leaving Val to follow her. Val was hastening to join her, when, by some mischance, her skirt caught in a nail or some projection. She stooped to disentangle it, and on raising her head, she saw Colonel Gordon, who had just entered, with Lieutenant Falconer.

Val felt that she turned pale. She had no veil, therefore could not hide her features. She was in terror lest Lieutenant Falconer should betray to Colonel Gordon, by some unguarded glance or gesture, that they were acquainted, and thus, perhaps, provoke some inquiry. Captain Verner's friend, however, was more prudent than she gave him credit for being. He saw her plainly enough, and also observed the scarcely perceptible sign which she made to him not to notice her. She was passing very quickly, when suddenly Aubrey, whom she had taken up in her arms, fixed his eyes on a little terrier, something like a snowball or a bunch of white silk, which Colonel Gordon held under his arm.

“ ‘Ice ‘ittle tod for Aub’y!’” cried the child, extending his little dimpled hands to the animal, and laughing gleefully.

Colonel Gordon's attention was attracted by the cry. He looked towards the child, and smiled grimly, without taking any further notice. Val quickened her pace, but to her vexation, Mr. Atherley was standing exactly between her and the door she wished to reach.

"How do you do, Mrs. Verner?" said he, when she approached near enough for him to address her.

"Thank you, pretty well. I have not been very well lately," replied Val, in an agitated manner. "I wished very much to see you, Mr. Atherley, to speak with you on—about a step which—I wanted to consult you, in short."

Mr. Atherley responded by a slight look of surprise.

"I am always at your service," he said, bowing.

"Thank you. I—I intended to call on you. When shall I find you disengaged?"

"I shall be at home this afternoon, at two o'clock, if it would suit you to call. I am merely seeing off this young lady by the train"—indicating, by a glance, the young girl who was with him, and who was examining some volumes on the book-stall.

"I shall call at two."

Mr. Atherley bowed again, and seeing that she was in a hurry to pass on, moved aside. She almost ran, and then flew into the room where Rose was hiding.

“Where is my father?” asked Rose. “Has he gone?”

“Yes—no, no. But, Rose, I have just seen Aubrey’s uncle, and—and Lieutenant Falconer—you know, the one who was with him the morning—the—”

“Yes, yes. I know. Is he here?”

“He is. Oh, Rose, if I could speak to him; but I dared not notice him. He was Aubrey’s dearest friend, and—his most intimate friend. He would know, don’t you think—”

She was almost choked by agitation. A flash passed over Rose’s face.

“Yes. Perhaps he is going by the next train, and we may not have another chance of speaking with him,” exclaimed Rose. “If my father were not here, I would go and speak to him directly. But I cannot. Oh, Val, my heart is beating so! I did not think it would affect me so much to see my father. I think he knew me, though he pretended not to see me. It was fortunate I had this thick

fall on. But we must see Lieutenant Falconer at all hazards. Why did we not think of applying to him before? We *must* speak to him. What are we going to do? We must be decidedly quick, because he will be off most probably either by the next train, or in a cab, if he leaves the Colonel."

The two young women looked at each other.

"I am afraid of Colonel Gordon," said one.

"I am frightened to death for fear my father should see me," whispered the other. "When he fixes his eyes on me I tremble all over. Come, we must risk something," added Rose, as a porter entered the room to remove some luggage. "If my father comes in I'll run away; and after all, if Colonel Gordon comes in, he doesn't know you, so why need you fear? How is Falconer dressed?"

"In—I hardly know—a long, dark blue coat, buttoned up, I think—"

"H'm—a Noah's Ark affair. Well, what else?"

"I noticed he had a rough striped railway wrapper on his arm.

"And the Colonel? Be quick. We have no time to lose."

“He wore a black coat, made of something like bearskin. He was carrying a little white dog, which Aubrey cried for.”

“Will you,” said Rose, going up to the porter, and urbanely addressing him,—“will you be kind enough—there is a gentleman with a fair beard, who is dressed in a tight dark blue coat, carrying a railway wrapper on his arm, standing with another, an older gentleman, who is carrying a little white dog, on the platform. Will you try to take an opportunity to speak to the younger gentleman, ask him if his name is Falconer, and if he says ‘yes,’ tell him a person in the waiting-room would be glad to see him for a few minutes. If you can manage to tell him without the knowledge of the gentleman who is with him, it would be all the better.”

She slipped half-a-crown into the man’s hand; he nodded significantly, and went on to the platform. He judiciously secured a moment when Colonel Gordon was examining some books on the stall, and Lieutenant Falconer was wandering up and down, and then delivered his message.

“A person wants to speak to me? What kind of person?”

“ Well, sir, if you’ll step this way, you’ll see,” answered the man, discreetly.

Lieutenant Falconer suddenly recollected that he had just seen his friend’s wife, and guessed that she was “the person” who had sent the message; so he said nothing more, but followed the porter. As he entered the waiting room, Rose ran up to him, with a hurried greeting.

“ I have not the pleasure of being able to call myself an old friend,” she said, “ but the urgency of the occasion induced me to take the liberty of one, in sending a message to ask you to come here.”

She stepped back for a moment, to allow him to offer a respectful recognition to Val, who, having put Aubrey down on a seat, was standing by her, with a pale face.

“ Lieutenant Falconer, a word”—resumed Rose. “ Are you going on by this next train, or have you simply come to see off a friend?”

“ Well, I’m going down to my father’s place, at Lutterworth, in Leicestershire,” answered Lieutenant Falconer, who seemed a little bewildered by the rather strange manner of both ladies. “ I have invited Colonel Gordon—a friend of mine—in fact the uncle of—hem—

of Captain Verner," he added, glancing towards Val, "I have invited him to spend some time there. It happens that we—I, indeed—made a mistake of half-an-hour as to the time the train starts, so we thought it better to wait than to go away and then return. We have been here now about eight or ten minutes"—he looked at his watch—"so we shall have to wait some twenty minutes yet."

"When shall you return?"

"From Lutterworth?"

"Yes."

"Not for some six or eight weeks."

Rose glanced at Val in despair.

"This is no place to talk about such things," she exclaimed, "but what can we do?"

"What is the matter? Can I be of any service?" asked Lieutenant Falconer, looking from one to the other.

"Shall I—?" demanded Rose, looking again at Val, who bent her head. "Lieutenant Falconer," continued Rose, thus sanctioned,—she spoke very rapidly, and in a low tone, laying her hand on his arm to secure his attention, "you are Captain Verner's most intimate friend. Do not interrupt me, or we shall lose time. You have known him for several years.

Can you tell us if he went to France about the year 1850?"

The young man looked at her, bewildered; then answered,

"I cannot tell. I was in Egypt at the time, and did not return for a couple of years after that."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Rose, drawing back, "we are baffled at every turn."

"What has happened?"

"There is no necessity to say anything more. Did Captain Verner ever make any stay in France, to your knowledge?"

"Oh, he has been there about a dozen times. I was there with him twice."

"You will think it strange, I fear, that we should first trouble you with an urgent message, and then refuse to tell you the reason thereof," said Rose. "But we cannot tell you what has happened, since you are unable to help us to elucidate the mystery."

"I regret that I cannot assist you in——"

"Thank you. We will not detain you, my dear sir."

"I trust Captain Verner is well?" inquired Lieutenant Falconer.

"My friend heard from him some weeks

since, and he was quite well at the time his letter was written," answered Rose, gravely.

"Aubrey Verner's little boy?" said Lieutenant Falconer, approaching the child, with an inquiring air.

"Yes," replied Val, in a faint voice.

The child, instead of drawing back shyly, extended its tiny arms with a smile, apparently having some association of ideas between this gentleman and "Dada." Charles Falconer, who usually loudly asserted his dislike of children, and especially young children—although the little ones, wherever he was, came crowding round him—took up Master Aubrey, and kissed him.

"His grand-uncle ought to see him, and his heart would relent," he said, as he put the child on the floor.

Val smiled, and shook her head, without speaking. This interview had exhausted her. Lieutenant Falconer remarked on her pale looks.

"She has been very ill," said Rose, "and is, even now, unable to endure fatigue or agitation."

The young officer, taking this hint in good part, shook hands with the ladies, and then

withdrew. Aubrey toddled after him, threatening to begin to cry because he would not turn back, so Rose took the baby-tyrant up. A few people came lounging into the room, but they took no notice of either Rose or Val, who sat together, Rose holding her watch before her, to see how the time went. She allowed full twenty minutes to elapse, then, as everybody had left the room, she peeped out cautiously, and saw that there was an opportunity of escape. Still carrying Aubrey, she signed to Val to follow, ran out from the place, and jumped into the first cab she saw, Val still closely following her.

“I am so relieved,” she said, with a deep sigh. “I would never have come near the place if I had thought such an adventure would occur. I cannot imagine where my father was going. Did he speak to you?”

“Yes. I told him I wanted to see him this afternoon, but not the reason.”

“Was he civil?—but of course he would be to you. I wonder—Now isn’t it a shame to be so vindictive to me?”

“Do you think he will ever forgive you?”

“Never—never! I *know* he won’t. Once he takes a dislike to any person, he never can

get over it. We never can be friends again, I know. I feel it. He was so disappointed about me, you see, and then my marriage made him fairly wild. He thought I was to do wonders, to make up for his disappointment about Floretta. It makes me very miserable, Val; for, do you know, I really love my father, though I love Frank Milburn better. Oh, it makes me very, very, very miserable—wretched, sometimes, though I say I don't care about it. And I say to myself I don't care, and then I feel as if I could pinch myself for pretending a falsehood. Ah, misery me!"

The drive was accomplished in silence. When Rose arrived home, she had somewhat recovered her spirits, and began talking in her usual careless way about Val's proposed visit to her father, Mr. Atherley.

"By the way," she observed, "don't say you are staying with me. You can mention that you are living here, because he doesn't know what quarter of the town I am in. It isn't likely he will ask you, but it is awkward being taken unawares. If he should happen to call on you, he will not know anything about me, for I can keep out of the way. You understand?"

She grew uneasy as the day drew towards the time, though she tried to maintain a lively demeanour, and ordered up luncheon, and insisted on making Val and Aubrey partake of the delicacies, and take some of the wine which she placed on the table, although she could swallow nothing herself.

“I have not seen my father since the night before my marriage,” she said, leaning back in her chair, and turning Aubrey’s curls over her fingers. “I did not think it would upset me like this. I am not so strong as I used to be. I suppose I am growing old. Let me see—I am—h’m—nearly twenty-three. There is one thing I wanted to say—it is not necessary to tell my father—what was I going to say? Stupid!—I forgot. Never mind.”

She said nothing more until Val was ready to go; even then, she merely uttered a few words of course, and kissed her. She wanted Val to take a cab, but Val replied that it was such a short way that it would be nonsense not to walk.

“Besides,” Val added, “you forget that my funds are running very low. I have very little left of my last quarter’s allowance, and it

would be absurd to waste it on needless luxuries."

So Val set off, and in about ten minutes reached the house of Mr. Atherley.

He was not at home when she arrived, but she was ushered into the drawing-room, where she found a lady whom she had not seen before. This was Miss Agnes Cloutesley, the sister of Mrs. Atherley. A little girl was sitting on a low stool, netting. This child was about ten years of age, with bright violet eyes and a face which seemed to plead for love.

Val felt rather embarrassed on being left with these personages. Miss Cloutesley's manner was not of a character to dispel such a sensation. She appeared to be immersed in an unusually sentimental novel when Val entered, and was dwelling on a particularly touching scene between the heroine and her lover; but she rose, and looked at her unexpected visitor.

"Miss Cloutesley, I believe?" said Val, after a disconcerting pause—having heard of her from Rose, and thinking that this lady must be Rose's aunt.

Miss Cloutesley swept a superb, stately curtsey, imitated from her sister, but lacking

the ease imparted by that lady. “Miss Cloudesley,” she repeated, graciously.

“I am—my name is—Mrs. Verner,” said Val, hesitatingly. She did not feel justified in taking any other name at present.

“Ah. Ahem! Pray be seated. I think I have heard your name from my niece. This young lady is another of my nieces—Miss Julia Stanford.”

Val bowed, and was greatly at a loss what to say next. Julia blushed crimson, raised her eyes, then hurriedly averted her head.

“Have you read this charming work, ‘The History of a Beautiful Flirt?’” asked Miss Cloudesley, when some moments of painful embarrassment had elapsed—painful only to Val, however, for Miss Cloudesley was one of those antiquated belles who take a spiteful pleasure in trying to disconcert younger women and girls, although they display the utmost sweetness when one of the rougher sex is near.

“No; I never heard of it.”

“Never heard of it!” exclaimed Miss Cloudesley, opening her eyes. “Perhaps you are not much of a reader, Mrs. Verner?”

Val blushed. “I am afraid I do not read as much as I ought.”

“Why, you ought to read this charming, this exquisitely touching work. There are some deliciously sentimental scenes. Shall I tell you the plot?”

“Thank you,” said Val, rather vacantly.

“Well, it is the history of a young lady who is very fond of flirting—which is a very bad and wicked practice, most strongly to be reprehended. I have, all through my life, set my face against that kind of thing. However, this young lady, her name is Cyrilla Danvers, and she is exquisitely lovely, she—I hardly know how the story goes on—but she breaks the hearts of a great many people, gentlemen I should say. And there is a charming young lady, who is in love with the hero, and her father will not give his consent to their marriage. Her horse runs away with her, and she is on the point of being dashed into a frightful chasm, when her lover, (his name is Gerald Mortimer,) appears, and receives her just as she falls from her horse, fainting. No, I should have told you, he seizes the bridle of the horse, and stops it at the risk of his life. Then there is a charming scene. I have just peeped at the end of the third volume, and I see that they are married.

It is by the author of ‘United at Last; or, Fickle as Fair’—a delicious work. Have you read it?”

At this instant, the door of the drawing-room was thrown open, and Mr. Atherley entered. Val started up, and advanced to meet him. Presently Miss Cloutesley began to perceive that she was rather in the way, as they evidently wanted to talk about business, so she executed another stately curtsey, and left them together, taking away with her her novel and her niece.

“Now, Mrs. Verner, we can talk of the matter regarding which you desired to consult me,” said Mr. Atherley, drawing his chair a little closer to the fire, and warming his hands.

In a few brief words Val explained that for certain reasons she wished to be able to earn sufficient to support herself and child during the absence of her husband. That she did not consider she could make anything by teaching or by fancy needlework, so she thought if she could gain even a slender income by her voice it would be a happy relief to her.

“You want to go on the stage, or become

a concert singer?" said Mr. Atherley, sharply, looking at her. "Very good. I know the capabilities of your voice. You want me to assist you. That is it, if I understand aright?"

Val hesitatingly explained that such was her wish. She added, that, just at present, her strength would not admit of her doing much, but that by the time she was ready, she would have recovered from the effects of her late illness.

"Come, let me hear you sing. I suppose you have not practised much of late?" said Mr. Atherley.

"No—not much."

"I thought not. Ladies generally give up their accomplishments when they marry."

He went over to the pianoforte, followed by Val. He turned over the loose, unbound music, searching for something for her to sing. Suddenly his hand lighted on a showily-illuminated sheet, evidently some ephemeral trifle, entitled "Let us Forgive and Forget."

On the right hand, at the top of the margin, was written, in a bold, careless, dashing hand, the name "Rose Atherley."

Rose's father looked at this for a moment, then took it from the bundle of songs. He

folded it up longwise, quietly, and without the slightest appearance of haste, and finally, without speaking, he walked direct to the fire, and thrust it between the bars.

Almost at the instant he did so, a bright flood of sunshine came into the room, surrounded the dark figure of Mr. Atherley, and streamed over the fire, as if to extinguish it. Mr. Atherley walked quickly to the nearest window, and jerked down the blind, with a furious hand, though his face was as impassive as if carved in marble.

As this mute scene passed rapidly before her eyes, a strange thought occurred to Val. She fancied, for a moment, that the sunshine was the visible presence of an angel, who had floated in, vainly attempting to stay the hand of the father; and that the action of the man who thus ruthlessly pushed from him what seemed almost like a last appeal was that of one who *defied*.

She had not time to think about it, however, for, as the embers of the burnt paper came falling on to the hearth, and flitting up the chimney, Mr. Atherley returned to the pianoforte, where she was still standing. He did not look at her, nor utter a word, re-

suming his search with apparent calmness. Presently he found a piece which he had taught her. Then, without speaking, he sat down, and played the prelude with his usual firm touch.

Val tried to sing, but, not being very well, and being, moreover, rendered nervous by what had just happened, she was unable to command her voice. She stopped, began again, and finally broke down altogether.

Her master abruptly threw aside the piece of music which she was trying to sing, closed the piano, and quitted his seat.

“It is useless your attempting to sing to-day,” he said, almost harshly. “I know your voice, however, and what you can do. If you will return again to-morrow we will talk more about this. Do you understand the terms on which *débutantes* are generally brought out?”

“N-no—I do not,” answered Val.

“You will bind yourself to an engagement for three years. I will ‘produce’ you, it will cost you nothing, and you will give *me*, in return, one half of what you receive during that time. After the expiration of our agreement you are free to do as you like. If you

accept these terms, and your voice is still in good order, the matter is settled. Can you call to-morrow at four?—will that suit you?"

"Yes."

"Well, good morning. I will not detain you now; I can see that you are not very well. Good morning."

He opened the door and attended her down stairs, opened the street-door himself, and waited till she had gone a little way.

Val felt almost as if escaping from some atmosphere in which she could not breathe. Her steps quickened when she had turned the corner of the street, and she was really relieved when she found herself safe in Rose's drawing-room. Rose was seated before the cheerful fire, little Aubrey being asleep in an immense arm-chair, opposite to her.

"You have seen my father?" she cried, eagerly, though speaking in a low tone, not liking to disturb the child. "What did he say?"

Val gave her an account of all that had passed, with the exception of one little incident.

"Ah, I—I feel so stupid to-day. I wish—I—wonder; they say, they who wonder are

fools. So you are to go again to-morrow? What a terrible thing it is to love anybody, and yet to be at war with them, and know that they will never, *never* forgive you. I am glad that you—— Did he—I suppose he did not speak of or allude to me?"

"He did not speak of you at all."

"No, I knew he would not; I did not expect it. O, my dear, he will never let my name pass his lips again, I am assured of that. Well, it cannot be helped. But—O, Val—well, never mind—I——"

Rose suddenly broke into a wild burst of crying, and clasped her arms round Val, laying her head on her friend's shoulder. Val, who had never seen Rose give way to emotion before, was almost terrified. In an instant, however, Rose sprang up, with an angry, defiant air, and dashed away her tears.

"How stupid I am!" she cried. "Here I sit dozing over the fire, reading that stupid novel—" she seized a book at random, and flung it to the other side of the room—"I get drowsy, waken up, and grow maudlin."

She ran out of the room and flew upstairs. Val heard her singing at her loudest one of the most lively airs of the day, until her bed-

room door abruptly closed. However, she did not reappear for about twenty-five minutes, and then she was dressed for walking, and bade Val a careless good-bye, opening the drawing-room door a few inches, showing her profile for a moment, and then vanishing.

In about an hour she returned, and informed Val that she had been shopping—an assertion which she proved by emptying her pockets, and strewing the centre table with half-a-dozen small packages. This done, she went over to the easy chair where Aubrey was sitting, to recover from the fatigue of various skirmishes indulged in after his nap, and knelt down before him.

“Do you love me?” she asked, laughingly, looking straight into his eyes.

Aubrey put his little arms round her neck, as an affirmative.

“How much do you love me?”

“So mush,” answered Aubrey, holding the forefinger of each hand a very short way apart.

“What a stingy wretch! Why, I love you fifty times more than that.”

“So mush,” said Aubrey, hastily, opening his arms as wide as he could.

“Then you are a dear,” cried Rose, burying her face in his fat dimpled neck. “I have brought home something for you, Aubrey—something nice.”

She ran to the door, and returned holding the prettiest little curly, silky dog that ever was seen, which she popped into Aubrey’s lap.

“O, pitty, pitty, pitty!” cried Aubrey, rapturously, crumpling up the tiny darling in his arms.

“Rose,” cried Val, reprovingly, “you really should not—ought not——”

“Come, none of your nonsense. I suppose, as I have the pleasure of earning my own money, I may spend it as I like. Besides, I didn’t buy doggy for you, so you needn’t be cross about it. I heard that Master Aubrey wanted a dog this morning; I saw one in Regent Street as I was coming home, and I thought I might as well get it for him. Let the little ones have enjoyment while they can. Love, and caresses and gifts are to children what the sun and summer showers are to the flowers.”

“I do not like you to waste your money in that way,” said Val, with mild severity.

“I don’t like you to waste your breath in lecturing me, when I know it will not do me the least good in the world,” answered Rose. “There’s Frank, so you must try to look a little more amiable, my dear madam.”

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

THE next afternoon Rose took no notice when Val went out, leaving Aubrey with her.

On entering Mrs. Atherley's drawing-room, Val found the little girl whom she had seen the preceding day. She saw that this child bore a remarkable resemblance to Rose, and this likeness immediately won her heart; she approached, and looked at the netting which the child was engaged in doing. Julia glanced up shyly, blushed crimson, looked down again, and appeared to be reduced to a very nervous state by the presence of the stranger.

"You are fond of this work?" said Val, sitting down beside her—asking the question, because she scarcely knew what to say.

"No, I hate it," answered the child, in a low tone.

“Then why do you do it?”

Julia looked up with a half comical look, which reminded Val of one of Rose’s sly glances.

“I must do it, because—but I don’t like it. I should like to go out, or something of that kind, because I have come here for the holidays, you know, and I think it is very stupid being kept all day——”

She was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Atherley, who looked pleased on seeing Val; the good lady had spoken a few words, when a loud double knock was heard.

“That is Mr. Atherley’s knock,” said his wife to Val. “Come, Julia, we will go upstairs. I always try to keep the child out of his sight,” she added, in a whisper, “for he hates her, because she happens to be like poor Rose.”

Mrs. Atherley went out of the room, followed by Julia, and in a few minutes Mr. Atherley appeared, with an apology for being behind his appointed time. Julia came in again as he was speaking.

“What do you want?” he demanded, harshly.

“A book I left here,” replied the child, timidly.

“ How often have I desired that you would not enter this room?” said her uncle.

“ Yes; but, Uncle Guy——”

“ Quit the room,” said he, sternly.

Julia obeyed, almost in tears at this harsh dismissal.

Val followed her master to the pianoforte, and essayed the song in which she had failed the preceding afternoon. She was able to command her voice this time, and went through the piece without once faltering. When she finished, Mr. Atherley produced another air, and required her to sing that, which she did.

“ Very good,” said Mr. Atherley, rising from his seat, and leading the way to the fire. He paid her no compliments, nor did he give her any opinion on the state of her voice. “ You will necessarily have to undertake a great deal of real drudgery and hard work, if you purpose making the stage your profession. Have you duly considered all this?”

“ I have considered nothing—that is, I am willing to undertake any drudgery, anything you think I ought to do——”

“ I will impose nothing on you,” interrupted Mr. Atherley, coldly; “ I shall simply direct your studies. The task on which you enter,

indeed, will give me much care and labour. You are willing to incur the necessary hard work?"

"Perfectly," replied Val, chilled by his manner, and anxious to get away.

He continued to talk with her for some time, making her thoroughly comprehend the difficulties of the thorny path on which she desired to set her foot. At last he permitted her to go, fixing an appointment for the next week.

When she reached home, Rose so obviously avoided alluding to the subject of her visit to the house of Mr. Atherley, that she did not attempt to speak of it. Rose would not touch on it until the morning of the day arranged for her to go again to Cavendish-square, when Val was leaving the drawing-room to put on her bonnet. As she expected to be detained later than on the previous occasions, and as Rose was obliged to attend a rehearsal of a "grand new operatic selection" at the place where she sang, Aubrey was left in the guardianship of Rose's maid, Susan. As Val opened the door, Rose ran abruptly towards her.

"Val," she said, hurriedly, catching her by the arm, with a nervous grasp, "I want to say a word."

“Yes?” rejoined Val, looking at her with surprise.

“I—do you think—Val, I want to go with you this morning——”

“With me?”

“To—to my father.”

Val was unable to speak: she was startled equally by this sudden resolution, and by Rose’s hesitating manner.

“He cannot refuse to see me—shut the door, please—he *cannot* refuse. I will not give him the opportunity, for I shall not announce my name,” added Rose, who was extraordinarily agitated. “And then—he used to love me—I know that. I cannot bear to live in this state of enmity. He must forgive me, and be again as he used to be. He cannot help forgiving me, and taking me once again in his arms, when I tell him that I am sorry for having offended him. You say nothing.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

Rose drew back for a moment, as if cowed by this answer. She was so unlike herself that Val did not know what to say or to do, having been in the habit of depending on Rose, as stronger, more self-reliant, more quick-witted than herself.

“No matter. It doesn’t signify. It matters very little,” said Rose, recovering her self-command. “Let us make haste. I am in a fever. O, he cannot—he will not refuse to be friends with me,” she cried, turning to where Aubrey was, taking him in her arms, and running upstairs, followed by Val.

“What will you—will you send any message to the music-hall people?” asked Val, timidly.

Rose turned sharply round; then, before replying, considered for a moment. “No, no. I don’t care about them. Make haste.”

In a short time they were in the street, Aubrey having been committed to the care of the servant. Rose walked so fast that Val, generally a brisk walker, found it difficult to keep pace with her. At last, they arrived at the door of Mr. Atherley’s house. Rose would not give herself time to think, but knocked loudly.

Mr. Atherley was at home. Val sent up her name, but Rose withheld hers. They were ushered upstairs, and the page flung open the door of the drawing-room, where Mr. Atherley was sitting writing at a desk near one of the windows. He rose on hearing the ladies enter, and faced them.

Rose was trembling so violently that she was obliged to lean on Val's arm for support. She threw back her veil, and looked at her father.

For a moment father and daughter contemplated each other. His face darkened—hers grew white. A dead silence reigned in the apartment for several seconds, and it seemed as if you could have heard the pulsations of their hearts.

“Papa!”

The cloud on Mr. Atherley's brow became more ominous. Rose made one step towards him, then paused, terrified by his black looks.

“Papa!” she repeated, in an accent of such intensity, such heart-rending entreaty, that Val shivered.

Her father remained frigidly in the same attitude.

“Dear papa,” said Rose, for the third time, advancing in spite of his forbidding looks. “Father—will you not forgive me? I am sorry I offended you. I long to be pardoned by you. Papa, I have never humiliated myself to anybody; you know how refractory I always was, and how I never would ask pardon for anything of anybody. Now, see me almost

at your feet,—and—I don't know what to say, papa, to make you relent; but indeed, indeed, it makes me feel so miserable—that—because we are not friends. Are we never to be friends again?"

"Madam," said Mr. Atherley, addressing Val, "as you are a lady, I must not find fault with you; but, at the same time, I must say that you have taken a most unpardonable liberty, in bringing into my house a person with whom I am totally unacquainted, and with whom I have not the slightest desire to become acquainted. This—this person is, I presume, an acquaintance of yours, and as such, madam, I shall not treat her with any discourtesy; but I think, madam, that good taste might dictate to you that the presence of individuals with whom I am unacquainted cannot be a source of satisfaction to me."

"Sir," said Val, indignantly, "you are cruel."

"Is your heart, then, really of stone?" bitterly cried Rose. "Can you—have you no mercy—no pity? Father, you cannot really mean that we are never to be friends again? It is impossible—impossible!"

"I am under some error, I presume, with

regard to the object for which we made an appointment this morning, madam?" said Mr. Atherley, in a tone of ice, speaking to Val. "I understood that we were to enter on some arrangement with regard to recommencing your studies. It appears that I was mistaken. I am at a loss to comprehend the purpose of your visit."

"Sir," said Val, "you act in a very cruel manner."

Mr. Atherley threw himself into a chair, and drew a deep breath, as if prepared to wait for some enlightenment on an exceedingly wearisome matter, of which he was at present profoundly ignorant.

"How long is our interview to last, Mrs. Verner?" he demanded, taking out his watch, and glancing at the timepiece, as if to compare the dials.

Rose went behind his chair, and leaned over its high back, pleadingly.

"Papa," she said, "will you listen to me?"

He answered not a word, but kept his eyes fixed on the timepiece.

"I cannot endure your coldness. I have not been a dutiful child to you—I confess it; I am sorry. What more can I say? Will

you forgive me? Ah! I had thought of so many things to say to you, that must have touched your heart—I thought of so many things to touch you, and now I am so stupid; I cannot say anything to you, and yet my heart is full. Papa, I say as the children do—I am sorry, will you forgive me?"

Her accent was so plaintive that it might have moved any one else. As for Mr. Atherley, he uttered not a syllable in reply; when she had ceased, he looked at Val, who was standing at a little distance. He opened his lips, once, twice, without being able to articulate.

"Sir," said Val, misinterpreting his glance, "your heart cannot be made of adamant. Will you not extend forgiveness to your daughter? After all, can you blame her for consulting her own happiness? She and her husband love each other, and have not repented their union. Perhaps, had she obeyed you, and struggled on in the path in which you wished her to persevere, she might not have found either happiness or content."

Mr. Atherley clenched his right hand, and drew a deep breath.

"Won't you vouchsafe me a word, papa?" said Rose.

“Mrs. Verner,” said Guy Atherley, in an icy tone, turning his eyes from the timepiece to Val, “we have wasted exactly twenty-seven minutes. As my time is of value, you will excuse me, I am sure, when I inform you that I cannot afford to lose the entire afternoon. If you feel inclined to call upon me regarding the commencement of your studies, I shall be happy to see you to-morrow at two o’clock. I have the honour to wish you good morning!”

He rose and moved towards the door. His daughter caught him by the arm.

“Papa!” she cried, wildly, “you—you will not——”

She looked in his face for a moment, grasping his arm with all her force. Their eyes met, and they remained utterly silent for a couple of seconds, in the same attitude.

“Will you *never* forgive me, papa?”

“NEVER!” said Guy Atherley, in a hissing voice. “Never, never!” He suddenly gripped her hand, disengaged it from his arm, flung her from him with violence, opened the door, and ran down stairs. In a minute they heard the street door close with a terrible clang.

Rose leaned against the wall, one hand pressed on her forehead, the other against her

left side ; her face was perfectly pale, and her eyes closed. She did not speak for several minutes, and Val, who had not stirred all this time, was afraid to utter a word.

“ My God, what do I not suffer ! ” said Rose, in a very low tone, at length, without altering her position. “ My God ! give me strength, for I can do nothing. “ Oh, my God ! help me ! ”

There was another deep silence, and then Rose moved slowly towards a chair, sank into it, and buried her face in her hands. Val approached her, and was about to speak, when the drawing-room door opened, and Mrs. Atherley appeared on the threshold.

“ My mother ! ” cried Rose.

She ran to her mother, and clasped her in her arms for a moment.

“ I came on a fool’s errand,” she said, bitterly. “ I might have known what was to be gained as my reward. It doesn’t signify. I have humbled myself to the dust ; I will never do so again—never, never, never, *never !* ”

“ He is stone—adamant,” said Mrs. Atherley, who easily guessed what Rose had come for.

Rose stopped her.

“ Speak no more about the matter, dear,”

she said; "I cannot bear it. I cannot stay now; I must get away. I feel as if the air here was stifling me. Will you come to see me to-morrow? Any time will do for me. I have to go out for a short time, but you won't mind if you have to wait for me? Will you come about one?"

"You cannot go now, my darling. You are trembling all over. I cannot let you go."

"I must, I must. I cannot stay," cried Rose, looking round with the fluttering glances of a bird suddenly imprisoned. "You will come to-morrow?"

Mrs. Atherley promised that she would do so, and Rose, kissing her, escaped down stairs, followed by Val, opened the door, and gained the street. She walked so fast for some minutes that Val found difficulty in keeping up with her; then she complained that Val was dragging her along, and moved so slowly that Val feared she must feel faint. By the time they reached the end of the street, however, she fell into her ordinary pace.

"I wonder did my father ever really love me?" she said, at length, speaking more to herself than to her friend. "After all, the best way is to be cynical, and care about no-

body. Yet how can I, or anybody, help liking some people, disliking others, and so on? It is no use trying not to care about others ; besides, ‘Don’t Care’ isn’t a happy individual at any time. Then, although I have lost my father,” she added, more cheerfully, “I have Frank, and you, and Aubrey, and my mother, and even Floretta. Poor Flore! . She’s rather insipid, but she has a good heart. Well, I’m not going into a fit of the blues, I can tell you. Where’s the good—*cui bono*—isn’t that it? Moping spoils the complexion, to say nothing of the nose; and I haven’t such a fine specimen of either that I can afford to run the chance of injuring them. Take life easy, if you can ; and if you can’t, why, more’s the pity. If a thing cannot be helped, where is the use of bothering yourself and your neighbours about it? Just let it alone ; it’s the best way.”

Val did not answer, simply because she was at a loss what to say, and she shrewdly suspected that Rose’s cheerfulness was merely assumed to hide her real feelings. So they walked on in silence, Rose amusing herself by looking at her own reflection in the shop windows, as she happened to be on the inner

side of the pathway. At the corner of a street, before a large public-house, they saw a harpist and a violinist performing. It was Raymond and his comrade.

“Ah, there is that man I was speaking of the other night. Listen! He really plays singularly well. I must give him something.” She took out her portemonnaie, extracted therefrom a half-crown, and going up to Raymond, gave it to him.

Raymond looked at the coin, and at her, in some surprise; however, he accepted it without any particular observation, simply bowing very humbly.

“A piece of extravagance, I know,” said Rose, with a light laugh, as she regained Val’s side; “but I had nothing less, and I could not resist giving him some money. It seems a thousand pities that so good a player should be condemned to perform in the streets. Come, time is running on. Let us make haste.”

The next day Val went, with much reluctance, to her teacher. He received her with the most perfect equanimity and his usual coldness, not alluding in any way to the scene which had occurred. For several weeks she

continued to visit him, generally every second day. He had selected for her the character of Lucia di Lammermoor, which she was to sing in English. Val was so docile a pupil, and so intelligent, that her master found his work comparatively easy; and he was sanguine of her success.

The real labour of learning her part, and of studying what Mr. Atherley marked out for her, drew Val's thoughts a good deal from her own painful life.

But she and Rose, as time passed on, began to wonder that no answer came to the letter which she had written to her husband. Rose's faith, if not absolutely shaken, was not so confident as heretofore, though she carefully concealed her misgivings from her friend.

“He may not have meant any actual villainy,” she argued to herself, “and yet it may be all quite true. I know very well what men are—a precious set, even the best of them. It may have been that he married this French girl, and that he either deceived her with a mock marriage, or he thought the marriage informal, or that she was dead, or something of that kind. It is impossible that he could have wilfully and knowingly deceived Val.

I feel confused by the whole affair; I cannot understand it. Why doesn't he write? Perhaps he is ill; perhaps he has been moved to another station, and has missed the letter, or he may have written to the same address, and we know nothing about it. The entire thing is vexatious—a perfect entanglement."

She speedily ascertained, by looking at the list in the papers, that, when Val's letter had been posted, Aubrey was still at the station to which she was to direct. But then he might have been ordered to another part of the country while Val's letter was on its way, or he might have been ill, or—she hardly knew what to think. The more she cogitated the more baffled she felt. If Aubrey had been anywhere within an attainable distance, she would have gone straight to him, and demanded of him the truth; but while he was so far away, and when even letters did not seem to reach him, or he would not reply to them, any attempt at investigation was useless.

She spoke to Val, and was puzzled, alarmed by the strange way in which Val answered her.

"I feel inclined to shake you," she said, in an irritated tone. "Are you going out of

your mind, that you don't seem to care whether he writes or not, or anything about it? It seems to me that you are getting stupefied. Now, it will be a pretty piece of business if——”

She had begun in jest, but a terrible thought darted through her brain, and made her pause.

The calm, yet disquieted manner of Val, the evident effort she displayed in straining her attention, the unwillingness she testified to entering on the subject, yet the feverish anxiety she was struggling against—all this distracted Rose, who was deeply attached to the friend whom she did not know had the claim of blood-relationship upon her. A new terror seized Rose's heart, and she resolved to narrowly watch the unfortunate young wife.

Before Rose had observed the strange alteration in her friend, the same terrible thought had occurred to Val. She wished to speak to Rose about the cloud which was spreading over her brain, and which grew more dense every week; but she dared not. One day she was kneeling on the hearth-rug, playing with Aubrey, who was on Rose's lap; and she had then longed to tell Rose the fatal secret which she fancied she had discovered; but her heart failed her; she dared not approach the sub-

ject, she shrank with an inexpressible horror from any outspoken thought about it; and since that day she had withdrawn within herself, from dread of finding that her terrors were real. She now did everything in a purely mechanical manner; she was perhaps more obedient, more docile than she had ever been in her life before, but the dreadful thought, the awful suspicion, haunted her everywhere. She began to experience difficulty in precisely understanding what was said to her, though she did not betray this by her outward manner; any unexpected sound startled her so much that for some minutes she would continue trembling violently; she suffered from a curious distaste of life—not a desire to rid herself of existence, but an utter indifference as to whether she lived or died. In the morning, instead of rising refreshed by the night's slumber, she awoke in complete exhaustion, and with a vague terror of the day before her.

Had she not possessed her child, and had she not happily believed in the Friend who sticketh closer than a brother, she would have been in danger of realising the fear which flitted before her like a spectre. She would have in reality lost her reason.

CHAPTER VII.

SUSAN'S MOTHER'S LODGER.

THE strange state of mind to which Val was reduced did not hinder her from attending her master with the utmost regularity. She was so implicitly obedient, and remembered so perfectly all that he told her, that Mr. Atherley was not conscious of any change in her.

“Famous—most excellent,” he said one day. “You are sure to succeed, my dear child.”

One morning, at this time, she was sitting in her bedroom, making up some article of dress for little Aubrey. It was a bright sunny morning; and as she sat in the full light of the sun by the window, her thoughts were half sad, half pleasant. She did not notice the girl who was in the next room, “setting things to rights.” Presently, this girl—who

was Rose's servant—came into the room where Val was sitting, and began bustling about. Mrs. Verner was rather a favourite with the girl, Susan, because she rarely checked the continual gossip of that young person.

Val was not listening to what Susan was prattling about, and did not take much interest in the stories she was relating of different adventures, mixed up with a good deal of past personal biography, and enriched with occasional sketches of people she had known at various periods. Susan was rather anxious to attract her attention, however, as she wanted a confidant; not that she particularly needed a confidant, as in every one of her female friends did she repose the care of such simple secrets as she possessed. She went on giggling with an affected air of mystery, and a slight dash of the aspect of an ill-used party.

“And I'm sure she does torment the very life out of me, and all about such nonsense, as if I ever looked at the fellow. But you know, ma'am, what a one she is—that Betty, with her fiddlestick nonsense and fudge.” Betty was the name of the girl who was servant to the landlady of the house. “She's such a one to talk, and all about such rub-

bage. 'So,' she says, 'it's all settled.' 'What's all settled?' I says. 'O, you know very well,' she says again. 'Well,' I says, put out a little, nettled-like, 'if you've nothink better to do than talk rubbish like that, I have, and I can't stop to listen to your rubbish. What do you mean?' 'Well,' she says, smiling-like, 'you know you're going to be married to young Martindale.' 'The idea!' I says then, laughing-like; and she nods her head, and pretends it's all settled. Why, you know, mem, it isn't at all likely that I'd care about him, nor he about me, the least bit in the world, for you know I never thought of such a thing. And, besides, it's enough to frighten a body out of thinking of anything like being married when one sees all the people that's perfectly miserable, nothing else, tied together. Why now, you know, mem, there's my mother —just look at her. To be sure, she's an awful temper when she's put out about anything; but lor, father, he was twice as bad, and though I ought to say nothink about him, as he's dead now, yet I'm sure it was dreadful. And then you know, mem, since she's been left a widow, she isn't the respectable person she used to be—lor, quite different like, she is.

She lets lodgings in a poor sort of way, and of course she don't like it—'tain't likely she would. I can't abide some of the lodgers, though, to be sure, she can't pick and choose. There's only one she has now that's at all tolerable among 'em, and he's no great things as far as respectability goes—I mean when you come to talk."

Susan paused, as if reflecting on the advisability of confiding the secrets of her mother's household, and lowering herself in the estimation of Mrs. Verner. Love of talking, however, gained the mastery over prudence, and she continued—

"He's nothing in the world but a common street-player. To be sure, he's only got one of the top rooms, and he isn't even so much as looked at by the other people in the house; but he really is a quiet, nice man, I'll say that for him, and I don't care who says to the contrary. He's a nice old man, is poor old Georgy Raymond!"

A spasm seized Val's heart as Susan pronounced that name. She was about to cry out, but fortunately had sufficient presence of mind to remember that it might be an accidental coincidence, and that, in any case, it

would be prudent not to betray emotion in the presence of a chattering girl. She bent down her head for a moment to recover her breath, then, turning slightly, she said to the girl,

“What name did you say?”

“Mem?”

“Did you say that the name of your mother’s lodger was—was Raymond?” She uttered the name with difficulty.

“Yes, mem—he’s a street player—plays the harp.”

Val’s heart beat wildly.

“How old is he? You said he was old?”

“Well, you know, mem, he is old, dreadfully old—that is to say, not exactly old, but you know what I mean. Oldish, you know; not young.”

“How old? Could you guess?”

“Well, ever so old. H’m—I really don’t know. Why do you want to know, mem, if I might be so bold as to ask?”

Val hesitated, at a loss what excuse to give for her curiosity. The girl looked at her, with a kind of stupid wonder.

“Simply foolish curiosity, that is all,” said Val, rising with affected carelessness. “We

must not gossip idly, Susan; it is a waste of time, and you know, Susan, time is very precious—very precious, indeed." She scarcely knew what she was saying, and went on uttering words at random.

She hurriedly left the room, and ran rather than walked down stairs, to seek for Rose. She found her sitting near the window in the back drawing-room, half asleep, with Aubrey at her feet. Closing the door, Val went up to her friend. When she placed her hand on Rose's shoulder, her breath came and went in gasps, as if she had been running fast. Rose looked at her in astonishment.

"Rose," she whispered, tightening her grasp on Rose's shoulder, "I have—I think I have—I—"

"What is the matter?" demanded Rose.

Suddenly Val remembered that she had never told Rose of that one great secret in her life. She abruptly drew back, and covered her face with her hands.

"What—what, in heaven's name, is the matter?" repeated Rose. "Are you ill?"

Val withdrew her hands from her pale face, and looked at her with a piteous expression.

"You—you never knew that my father

was—a—street musician. I never told you, because——”

An exclamation broke from Rose’s lips.

“ He was a street harpist. His name was—was Raymond.” These words she uttered with difficulty.

“ Go on,” said Rose, with a coolness which Val had not anticipated.

“ I—I never knew whether he was living or dead. There is——” she could not continue.

“ Well?”

“ At the house of your servant’s mother there is a man—a street harpist—and his name is Raymond.”

“ Impossible!” cried Rose, meaning that the implied suggestion was improbable. “ Sit down. You are fearfully agitated.” She drew over a chair for Val. “ Aube, darling, will you go into the next room, and fetch me—hem—yes—a tiny scent-bottle which you will find in the top drawer of that little cabinet between the windows. Here’s the key.”

Aubrey took the key, and toddled off, pleased to be entrusted with it.

“ He will not be able to use it, or even to pull open the drawer if it was unlocked, but it will keep him out of the way for a few minutes. Come, I forgive you for your reticence

and all that; if there was time to spare, I might be angry, but there isn't. It's all right as far as that goes."

Val kissed her with silent gratitude.

"Oh, I can understand it very well. Wait a minute—let me think. This is very easily investigated. I know what is passing through your mind. We can readily ascertain if there is any ground for your chance surmise. It does look like a coincidence."

She stared steadily at Val, who was unable to utter a word, but gazed at Rose as if she was the arbiter of her fate.

"You—you do not, then, think that my hasty supposition is an unfounded foolish idea?" Val said, at length, speaking very low and hesitatingly.

"No, no; I think the idea is a plausible one. Let me see." She rested her chin on her hand, and looked out of the window, reflectively, and began picking off some of the leaves from the geraniums and fuchsias as an assistance to meditation. Aubrey came in before she could arrive at any tangible conclusion.

"I tan't open te drawers, aunty," he said to Rose—she had taught him to call her aunty.

She smiled as she took the key from him.

“Never mind, darling tweetum twy. I think I have found what I sent you for,” she answered, kissing him. “Sit by me, darling pet. Here is your picture-book.”

Aubrey was speedily immersed in his book.

“It will be an awkward and delicate affair to manage,” she resumed, addressing Val. “If he is the person we suppose, it would be all right. But if it isn’t—why—it would be unpleasant betraying—h’m. You see.”

She always expected Val to follow the current of her thoughts, no matter how loosely she expressed herself. Val trembled, but did not answer in words.

“I can understand and appreciate your anxiety. This must have come on you like a thunder-clap. We must write—it would be impossible to call.”

“Whatever you think right, I will abide by,” said Val, tremulously.

“Well, I think it would be the best way—don’t hurry me—yes—to write to him, rather ambiguously, you know, and ask him to meet me—*me*, mind, not you; because I don’t want to have any scenes until we find out if it’s all right, and besides you’d be sure to muddle it—to meet me at some place—say some pastry-

cook's, or some—— that would do. What do you think?"

"Then," said Val, hesitatingly, "I must wait until you have—— I feel so feverish."

"I have no doubt of it. But what good will it do you going and making a scene, and perhaps fainting from disappointment, or from joy, or something of that sort? It would be extremely unpleasant, you know, and would do no good. If I find that he is the man we want, I shall bring him to you. If he isn't, why, it will make no apparent difference, as I shall not tell him anything, unless I see my way very clearly."

Val leaned her now aching head on her clasped hands. Little Aubrey, seeing her evident distress, got off his cushion, and attempted to draw her hands away from her face. Rose went over to a side table, sat down, opened a desk, drew out some paper, and, with her habitual quick decision, wrote a few lines.

"There, will that do?" she demanded, going up to Val with the missive. It contained these lines: "A lady would be glad of an opportunity to speak with Mr. Raymond, if he could spare time between half-past three and

four o'clock to-morrow (Thursday), at Paget's, pastrycook, Tottenham Court-road. It is on a matter of some importance that she wishes to see him. If he will carry this paper folded in his right hand as he enters the shop, she will know and address him."

The characters swam before Val's eyes, and she was unable to decipher them. She told Rose so.

"Well, you've committed the affair to my management. I shall do the best I can. Rather an equivocal species of business," she added, folding the note to fit it for its envelope. "I hope Frank wont be jealous, that's all. I hardly think I shall tell him, unless it turns out all right. The end sanctifies the means." She enclosed the letter in an envelope, directed it, and put it in her pocket. "I am not going to pass it through the hands of that girl, because she is a prying wretch, and would wonder how I happened to write to her mother's lodger, and would in all probability find a method of assuring herself of the why and the wherefore."

So Rose went out and posted her letter herself.

When the note came into Raymond's hands,

he opened and read it with some bewilderment. He laid it down and took it up again; then the idea suddenly struck him that it had some reference to Val. “A lady?” Who could she be—what did she want—unless it was Val, and she was in difficulties, and had discovered that he was still living, and was perhaps not sure of his identity, or—there were many reasons why she might not wish to come to him direct, or to send her name, or ask him to go to her. Once possessed of this idea he was perfectly fevered. He walked to and fro the greater part of the night; and the next morning he did not go out as usual, but waited until it was time to start for the rendezvous: then, having already dressed himself as carefully as his slender wardrobe would admit, he set off for Tottenham Court-road.

As he entered the shop indicated, a lady, plainly though elegantly dressed, looked attentively at him. He had the letter written by Rose in his hand, folded, but sufficiently visible. She quitted her seat as he came in, glanced about, and after a momentary hesitation, advanced towards him. It was Rose.

“Mr. Raymond?” she said, hesitating a little, but looking fixedly at him. He was

the man whom she had so often noticed playing in the streets. A shudder ran through her frame, and she felt so startled that she was obliged to sit down.

“Yes, madam—my name is George Raymond. I believe——?” He extended the letter. She inclined her head.

“I desired,” she said, with perceptible embarrassment, “to speak a few words to you about—— It is something rather—I may say very unusual. Perhaps——” She rose, and advanced towards the door leading to the room upstairs, whither he followed her.

“Is it—anything—about my daughter Valentine?” he eagerly demanded, as they sat down near one of the windows.

“It is of Mrs. Verner, formerly Valentine Raymond, that I wish to speak,” she answered.

“Is she well—quite well?”

Rose looked at him hesitatingly. “Not very well.”

“She is not ill?”

“Oh, no. She is pretty well.”

“Thank you. Is she happy?”

“Far from it. She is——”

“Madam, may I ask who are you—might

I ask your name? You are not the Countess of Charrington?"

Rose shrugged her shoulders. "No, that I certainly am not. Well, my name is Milburn—Rose Milburn. I have no reason to conceal my name. Too many people know me by sight for that. I am, I believe, Mrs. Verner's best and nearest friend. I take the deepest interest in all her affairs."

"And she is not happy? Is she with her husband?"

"Her husband is in China."

"And she——?"

"She and her child are staying with me."

Raymond shivered. "She has a child then?"

"Yes—a little boy. If you will satisfy me by giving some tangible proof that you are really her father, I will take you to where she is."

"Alas, what proof can I give you, madam, beyond my word? Rather ought I to ask you to give me proof that the person of whom you speak is really and truly my lost daughter. You know, madam, that I can have no object in seeking to impose on you, because——"

"I did not intend to accuse you of such a thing," interrupted Rose, hastily. "My only

motive is to endeavour, as far as possible, to prevent disappointment."

"I will give you a history of the loss of my child. When she was eight years old, accident deprived me of the strength to earn my own livelihood." He spoke distinctly, with his head raised, as if to defy the imputation of shame. "A rich nobleman helped me. His wife took my eldest daughter, Valentine. This lady was the Countess of Charrington."

"Ah!" cried Rose.

"I lost my wife and my other children. I went abroad, to try to retrieve my fortunes, and could not take my child with me. I returned, and found that my—my daughter was married—to a Captain Verner. I did not wish to injure her in the eyes of the world, who would have regarded her with scorn if—if—"

"I understand you. My friend's history is that of your daughter. I think she must be your child."

Raymond clasped his hands.

"Why has she sent to seek for me? Is it that she loves me, or—why—?"

"It will be best that she and you should exchange explanations, I think."

"When can I see her?"

“To-day, if you will come with me.”

Rose, who had already paid for the cup of coffee and piece of shortbread which she had taken in the shop, left the room, and descended the stairs, followed by Raymond. On gaining the street, she walked on, without speaking further, until she reached Oxford-street. She drew down the thick fall which she wore, and Raymond had sufficient tact to walk a little behind her, so that no one would know that they were together. At the corner of Tottenham Court-road she deliberated for a moment.

“I think,” she said, “that we had better take the omnibus.”

Raymond perfectly understood that she did not want to be seen riding with him; so he simply bowed his head in assent, and they got into a Bayswater omnibus.

On quitting the vehicle, they had only a short way to go. When they reached the door of the house where Rose lived, Raymond was trembling so much that he was obliged to lean against the railing of the area.

Rose had a latch-key, with which she opened the door softly. She entered first, and, opening the door of the front parlour, desired Raymond to go in and wait. Then

she ran up-stairs to the drawing-room, which she found unoccupied, then into the back-room, where she discovered Val, who was standing near the window, pale as ashes, and trembling.

“I did not hear you knock,” said Val, in a husky voice. “I heard your step on the stairs. What news?”

“Can you bear it?”

“What!—good or bad—is my surmise true, or——?”

“Val, I am sure this Raymond *is* your father. He seems to know all about you, and he has really no motive to induce him to assert that he is your father, beyond the very natural wish to regain you.”

Val sank down in the chair from which she had risen, and looked at Rose with widely-opened eyes.

“When can I see him?” she cried.

“Now, if you think you are able to bear the shock of meeting him.”

Val gasped as if she were drowning.

“Oh, I am so weak, so weak! No, I am not weak—I am strong. Let me go to him. Is he here—in this house?”

“Wait.” Rose rang the bell, which was

answered by Susan, who looked satisfactorily unconscious.

“ Susan,” said her mistress, “ take my shawl and bonnet, and put them by, and then fold up the linen which is lying on the table in the corner of my dressing-room, and do not come down until I ring; and take care that Master Aubrey is kept quiet, as we don’t want to be disturbed. I suppose he is asleep now? Very well. Go.”

Susan accordingly left the room.

“ I do not want that girl to be wondering and tattling. Now nerve yourself and wait patiently.”

She quitted the room, closed the door, and went down to the parlour where Raymond was sitting.

“ Come,” she said.

He followed her, and in a few seconds was in the room where Val was standing, waiting to receive him.

“ Now it will be a terrible thing if there is any disappointment,” muttered Rose, as she closed the door.

For a few moments father and daughter gazed attentively at each other.

“ Have I at length found my child—my

Val—my own dear daughter?” said Raymond, advancing towards her, and taking her cold hand in his.

“ Oh, I hope—I——” Val sank on a chair, unable to say more.

She ought to have flung herself into his arms with an hysterical shriek, but she did not, because she was not quite sure that he was the father for whom she had so often yearned. Rose sat down at a short distance from them, and occupied herself ostensibly in sorting some loose numbers of some magazine that lay on the table,—arranging and disarranging them, just to give her the aspect of being pre-engaged.

“ You,” said Raymond to Val, “ have lost a father,—I have lost a daughter. The circumstances of my life and yours seem to suit as evidence that you are my child. Let us carefully compare our histories, that we may not be in doubt.”

They went over the story of their respective lives, matching the links until both were satisfied. Raymond produced one or two letters from Lord and Lady Charrington, to assist as proofs; and even Rose, who watched the two stories narrowly, could not help being con-

vinced, sorely against her secret wishes, that this man was her friend's father.

Raymond then folded his long-lost darling in his arms, and she laid her weary head on his breast. A profound silence ensued.

"Let me tell you the history of my earlier life," said Raymond, at length. "I was not always the miserable wretch you see me now. My father was a captain in the navy; I do not remember him, but I have heard that he was a handsome, kind-hearted man. My mother was a beautiful heiress, who loved not wisely, perhaps, but too well. Her family objected to the marriage, and never forgave her, and I know nothing of them. My father died when I was a very young child; my mother died when I was a mere boy, leaving me to the care of my elder brother, Guy."

At this juncture, Rose suddenly recollected her duties as hostess, and placed wine and glasses on the table. Raymond, in obedience to a sign from her, filled a glass, and continued to help himself from time to time. Val was listening earnestly to his story.

"Guy was some years my senior. He, I think, did not dislike me when we were boys, but he certainly did not care much for me.

We went to dwell with an uncle, my father's brother. This uncle was an artist of some eminence, and made a tolerably good income by painting, but the great passion of his life was music. He used to have musical evenings, when numerous friends would assemble. His wife was a charming musician. We, my brother and I, learned to sing and to play. I learnt the violin and Guy acquired a mastery of several instruments. By degrees Guy evidenced a talent for composition, which was eagerly fostered by our uncle Henry. He obtained for the lad the instruction of the best masters, and declared that Guy would prove another bright star in the musical world. As for me, my small abilities—if I had any—were quite ignored—my uncle spoke of sending me to college, or—I hardly knew what his projects concerning me may have been. I fancy he considered me decidedly a dull specimen. In fact, nobody ever remembered me when my brother was by. I never dreamt of being jealous of Guy's supremacy. It seemed to be right, and at that time he never displayed any arrogance towards me. There was a certain condescension in his manner, however, at all times; but as he was the elder, and the leader

in all things—one with whom I never thought of disputing anything—I rarely resented this. Time went by. My uncle Henry spoke of doing great things for us, but—well, he had not time to carry his ideas into effect, for he died suddenly, leaving his widow dependent either on her own exertions, or on the kindness of her friends. We were obliged to shift for ourselves—thrown into the water, we were forced to swim. I was then twenty—Guy was some few years my senior. Guy knew so many people of more or less influence and importance that he contrived to exist for some time by giving music lessons, and I managed to obtain an engagement at the little theatre in our town as a violinist in the orchestra. Just at this juncture—we were free-hearted, young, and hopeful, for though we regretted our good uncle deeply, yet—well, at twenty grief does not sear the heart irrecoverably, we both became attached to—to a beautiful girl, the daughter of our landlady."

Raymond paused for a few minutes, leaning his head on his hand.

"I did not know for some time that we were rivals—my brother Guy and I. I at length discovered the terrible truth. The shock was

—well, Lucy preferred me. She was—I would have willingly given my life to obtain the fulfilment of her lightest wish. I was a silly, romantic boy then. When Guy found that Lucy Ansdell did not care for him, I fear he—he was—He cursed me, her, himself, the whole world; he raved like a madman, and swore never to forgive either of us. He never vouchsafed a word to me after that, all the time we were obliged to reside together; and as soon as he could make arrangements he prepared to start for London. I felt his anger sorely. I had always been accustomed to look up to him; I believe I loved him after a queer doggish fashion. I tried one last effort to bring about a reconciliation. I followed him one night to a favourite haunt of his, the deserted cloisters of an old ruined abbey, on the outskirts of the town; and there I pleaded with him. I will not describe the interview, the memory of it is too painful. He repeated his maledictions. After that night I did not see him until—for years—long years. He—I—we married, Lucy and I. Then our struggles began."

Raymond again paused. Val clasped her hands tenderly round his arm, and sighed deeply.

"Yes, we had a bitter struggle. Then our first child was born. Ah, my girl, you have a brother yet living. He is in Australia."

A sudden ray shot athwart Val's memory.

"Charley, dear old Charley!" she cried. I remember him. He is alive, and well? O, shall I ever see him again?"

"He is married, and is very comfortably settled. He has written to me two or three times since I have come home. He is the only one, besides yourself, whom I have left to me. They are all dead—my wife, and all my children, save you and Charley. Well—I have nearly finished. I lost my humble situation at the country theatre. I was unfit for anything, as I had received an irregular education—indeed, I had almost educated myself, in a careless, desultory sort of way, more by observing what other people did than by any species of study; I may say that my efforts in the educational line were not signally successful. I came to London. I heard of my brother, who was making his way up the hill of life rapidly; but I dared not venture to ask him for any kind of help. I struggled desperately to stem the tide of misfortune—in vain. I sunk lower and lower, until at last

I had no resource but to accept an accidental offer from a man with whom I happened to become acquainted—a street violinist, who asked me—seeing that I was in sore want—if I—I would like to turn such little musical knowledge as I possessed to advantage. I had, during my stay at the country theatre of which I told you, gained some proficiency on the harp; so I—well, I had no choice, and I became his companion, and gradually fell into the way of life which I have since pursued. I have told you of the accident which led to my being obliged to part from you, my child. I have not told you that I made then an attempt to obtain the sympathy of my brother Guy. I was in the utmost despair, and I thought, besides, that his rancour must have subsided in the course of the years which had elapsed since we had met. I applied to him for—for a crust of bread, and—and he refused to give it. From that moment, Guy Atherley and I have never met.”

“Guy Atherley!” cried Rose. “My father!”

“Your father, lady?” said Raymond.

“Is—do you mean to say that Guy Atherley is your *brother*?” demanded Rose.

“Is Guy Atherley your father?”

“Good heavens, Val! we are *cousins*,” cried Rose.

Val was so utterly bewildered that she could not find words to reply. Every one was so surprised that they could do nothing but stare at each other.

“Well?” said Rose, at last, drawing her breath with a deep inspiration, like one who has been under water.

“Yes, Rose,” answered Val, timidly. She felt almost as if Rose ought to regard her in the light of an impostor.

“This is the most extraordinary thing I ever heard of.”

“It is strange,” said Raymond. “Alas, you have not much reason to feel proud of your new-found uncle.”

Rose did not answer, but Val could plainly perceive that she was by no means pleased.

“Come, my child, I am waiting with impatience to hear your history from the time I lost sight of you. Stay; I know that you were educated by Lady Charrington, and that you married, and that your husband is now in China. But I want to know the details of this train of events.”

Val bent her head. Scalding tears welled into her eyes; she silently laid her head on the table, rested her face on her clasped hands, and wept bitterly. Rose left her seat, and going over to her, put her arm caressingly round her.

“Poor child, poor child. It is very hard; what a cruel life,” Rose muttered.

Raymond was afraid to speak, lest he should jar on the feelings of his newly-recovered darling; he looked at Rose, then at Val, and pressed his hand tenderly on the shoulder of the latter, in token of sympathy.

Val raised her head and dashed off the tears from her face.

“Rose, will you tell my father what has occurred? O, I am happy in having found a father,” she murmured, taking his hand.

Rose went back to her seat, and, in a few words, told the bitter history of her friend’s troubles. Raymond fixed his eyes on her face, gazing steadily at her while she spoke, never interrupting, though his countenance grew dark as he listened. At last Rose finished her story, which she had brought up to that very week.

“ If there is right or justice in the land, my child shall have it,” he then said, fiercely clutching his hand. “ What a fate ! ”

He rose, and began pacing to and fro, with unequal steps. A few minutes passed before anyone spoke again.

“ Val,” said Raymond, at length.

“ My father ? ”

“ When your uncle, Guy Atherley, hears that you are *my* child he will no longer befriend you—he will, in all probability, become your bitter enemy.”

“ I do not think so,” interrupted Rose. “ Why do you say so, sir ? ” You are unjust to my father. If my father thinks himself injured, he may nourish feelings of anger, but Val has done nothing to make my father dislike her—on the contrary. You are perfectly unjust, Mr. Raymond—uncle, if you are my uncle. I do not disbelieve you,” she added, hastily, considering, in her rapid way, that he had no possible motive for deceiving her, and that he had told his story in complete ignorance of who she was.

“ The circumstance of Val’s being my child, the child of—of Lucy, the girl whom he loved

in times past, would suffice to render him implacable towards her," replied Raymond with calmness. "However, that can easily be ascertained. Val, my child, will you dare to acknowledge your poor father?"

Val answered him by a look almost of reproach.

"Speak of me, then, to your uncle Guy. You will judge for yourself by what he says, whether I must go. I have already trespassed on your time," he added, addressing Rose in a deprecatory manner. "My presence can give you but little pleasure; I can give nobody in the whole world pleasure."

"You must not speak so, my father," cried Val. "When shall I see you again?"

Raymond looked down at her face, into her eyes.

"Soon," he answered. His accent was inexpressibly mournful.

"But when?"

"Very soon."

"To-morrow?"

"No, not to-morrow."

"Why not, father? I used to call you papa long ago, I remember."

“ See your uncle Guy, and then write to me. I shall then know what to do. I shall take a better, more respectable lodging than the one I have already, and then, perhaps, you will come and visit your poor old father. Good-bye for the present, my darling, my darling!”

He opened his arms, and Val threw herself on his breast with sudden impetuosity.

“ O, dear father,” she cried, after a moment, “ I must show you my boy—my little child.”

She ran out of the room, flew upstairs, and presently returned, carrying Aubrey. The child, on seeing the stranger, turned his head over his mother’s shoulder, and refused to acknowledge the introduction to his grandfather.

“ Pretty, pretty darling!” said Raymond. “ He is frightened.”

“ Don’t you like that gentleman?” said Val to Aubrey.

“ No,” answered the young despot, grumpily.

“ Oh yes, you do—you must,” said Val, persuasively.

Aubrey put up his lip, partly in anger, partly in disdain.

“He is shy,” said Raymond. “He will, perhaps, learn to like me in time. I must go; it is getting late.”

He held out his hand to his niece, clasped that of his daughter, tried to exchange a smile with his grandson, and left the room, accompanied by Rose, who wished to see him to the door herself; for she was anxious, if possible, to prevent any chance of gossip. Having closed the street door, she ran upstairs again to Val.

“Well,” she said, “this *is* an extraordinary affair. It seems so queer to me. I can’t realise it.”

“Nor I, scarcely—” answered Val. “I feel happy—yet there is a weight on my heart, for which I cannot account.”

“Lie down here, on this sofa, and compose yourself. Your nerves must be half shattered. I wonder what my father will say. I must go out. It is nearly five o’clock. What a pity it is you didn’t turn out to be the daughter of an earl, or a rich landowner, or something respectable. Heigho! I am so astonished I don’t know what to do. When are you to see my father again?”

“To-morrow afternoon.”

“H’m. I *wonder* what he will say. I shall come in again when I have put on my bonnet, and then I expect to see you half way on the road to a good nap, which will do you a world of good.”

Val promised that she would try to rest.

“How very remarkable,” thought Rose, as she ran upstairs to her room. “He emptied the decanter of wine, and it was full when I placed it on the table. H’m—queer. Not that I grudge it to him.”

She looked in for a moment before she departed, to see how Val was, and to lock up the decanter, after her usual habit, in a lower compartment of the sideboard. When Rose had quitted the house, Val gave Aubrey some picture-books and some toys, and having seen him quietly ensconced in a corner close to the window, she lay back, with her eyes closed. She could not account for the strange sensation of mingled pain and pleasure which oppressed her. She fancied that unmitigated joy at having discovered the father of whom she had so often dreamt, for whom she had so often

yearned, should have filled her heart. Yet a gnawing sense of—well, she hardly knew what the feeling was—a vague mistrust haunted her. Mistrust? It was scarcely that: she could not analyse it.

CHAPTER VIII.

A QUARREL.

WHEN Rose met her husband at dinner, she told him of the discovery which had been made, but she hurried over the story as much as she could ; and although, in her surprise at the relationship which she had found to exist between herself and Val, she could not help talking a good deal on the subject, yet Val could clearly perceive that she was mortified—not mortified by her newly-found cousin, but by her Uncle George. It was humiliating to be claimed as niece by a man who occupied such a humble position, and who was so wretched in every respect. Val felt that, had it been possible to have withheld the secret from Frank, Rose would not have spoken of it at all. On principle Rose objected to poor relations ; and there are degrees even in poor relationship.

The next morning Rose was fidgety, but she said nothing on the subject until shortly before Val left the house to go to Mr. Atherley.

“Supposing,” she then hypothetically said, “supposing my father should feel so vindictive towards your father, that he withdraws his help from you, what do you intend doing?”

Val sighed.

“I shall leave it to my father to decide what shall be done,” she quietly answered.

“I wish we could hear from Aubrey. I wonder what he will think of all that has been going on during his absence? Why doesn’t he write?” added Rose, impatiently—not with any expectation of receiving an answer from Val, but simply to relieve her mind by making the observation.

Val bent her head, without replying. She had almost given up all hope of ever hearing from Aubrey again.

As Valentine entered Mr. Atherley’s drawing-room, her heart throbbed so painfully that she was glad to sit down and compose her thoughts before he came in. She heard his

step ascending the stairs, and as the sound smote her ears, she was obliged to press her hand against her side to still the beating.

She lost no time in speaking to Mr. Atherley about the discovery of her father.

“Sir, I have something of great importance to say to you. I do not know if you are aware that, for many years, my father and I have been separated, and that he lost sight of me. I have just discovered that he is still living.”

“Ah!” said Mr. Atherley, raising his eyebrows, as a polite expression of surprise.

“Yes, I have seen him. Mr. Atherley, I——” She grew cowardly from the perfect lack of interest displayed in his face and by his manner. Then she hurried on—“Mr. Atherley, you had once a brother.”

Her master started from his chair, but immediately re-seated himself. He looked keenly her.

“Proceed, madam.”

“Your brother George is living. Your brother George is my father.”

“Ah!” He said nothing more, and she was unable to tell what he thought of the information—the ejaculation was nothing more than a

deep breath. “Indeed!” he said, twitching his lips obviously. Val waited for him to say something which might give her a hint how to proceed.

“Well,” he observed, at last, in an ironical tone, as she remained obstinately silent, “I am happy to hear that you have found a parent—very happy. I believe it is the proper thing to remark. Permit me to congratulate you.”

Val was silent for a moment, at a loss what to say. She felt as if walking on ice, which might break under her feet at any unforeseen juncture.

“My news does not seem to make much impression on you, Mr. Atherley,” she observed at length.

“On the contrary,” replied he, approaching the piano and opening it—“on the contrary,” he repeated, looking back, and slightly inclining his head with a formal gesture.

“You did not know whether your brother was living or dead?”

Val was trembling. She was really unable to think of what she ought to say.

Mr. Atherley looked at her with an inde-

scribable glance—a glance charged with an indefinable meaning.

“ Well, madam ?”

“ You do not care for my father. You do not even like him.”

“ True, Mrs. Verner.”

“ Do you believe that I am your niece ?”

“ I see no reason for disbelieving that interesting fact.”

“ You do not ?”

“ Certainly not. It is of no particular consequence to me. It makes no perceptible difference in our business relationship.”

Val did not know how to proceed. The situation was so far removed from any little experience she might have acquired, that she felt as if she needed Rose to prompt her.

“ I know,” she resumed, timidly—“ I know the reason of your dislike to my father; but, sir—Uncle Guy—why do you cherish rancour against him all these years? Why——”

“ Who told you I cherished rancour ?”

“ I—I thought you did. My father told me——”

“ My dear Mrs. Verner, we are simply talk-

ing nonsense, it seems to me. I care not a jot for your father. It is a matter of supreme indifference to me whether he is living or dead. We are strangers, and such we will remain. I look upon him merely as a poor, weak fool who——” He shrugged his shoulders.

“Are you angry with me for speaking to you of this?”

“Not at all—ha! Why should I be? You may talk of anything you please—the weather, the state of the funds, the——” He shrugged his shoulders again. “If it amuses you, why talk away, Mrs. Verner; and when you are ready, I shall be happy to begin our morning’s lesson.”

“I feel under great obligations to you, and——”

“Why should you feel under obligations to me—eh? I do nothing for you that I would not do for the next person who might knock at my door, and offer the same advantages both to me and herself or himself that you do.”

“Mr. Atherley,” cried Val, passionately, “I hate you!”

Guy Atherley laughed.

“You are a bad man—a very bad, wicked

man. You have no heart. You have behaved abominably to your daughter Rose, and you now behave—well, I don't care how you behave towards me, but I will say that your conduct towards your brother—my father—is shameful—shameful!"

Guy Atherley laughed again. It seemed to afford him some amusement to witness this outburst of indignation.

"Truly, I am much obliged to you for your good opinion. Have you any more pretty compliments to spare? I am not much accustomed to receive compliments, as you are doubtless aware; therefore they come upon me with all the charm of novelty."

Val, quivering with suppressed anger, sprang from her seat, and began pacing the room.

"I break our bargain. I hate you!" she cried, stamping her foot.

"You are certainly improving as an actress. Admirable—admirable!" cried Mr. Atherley, laughing violently. "Excellent—admirable!"

Val, feeling that she had behaved ridiculously, sat down again, and covered her face with her hands.

“What is the matter, Mrs. Verner?” asked Mr. Atherley. “What is the meaning of this scene? Explain.”

“It is impossible,” said Val, recovering her self-possession to a certain extent, “perfectly impossible that I can hold any terms with one who is my father’s greatest enemy.”

“Gently, gently, my dear madam. Do not let your temper outrun your discretion.”

“I do not care what you say; you are a cruel, hard-hearted man. I——”

“Pray, what are we talking about, my dear child? Will it please you to enlighten me on that matter? And what have animadversions on my private character to do with your visit this morning?”

“Is there anybody in the world that you like, Mr. Atherley? Well, I tell you this much, I don’t care for you in any way; and as I find that you are the bitter enemy of my own father, I will no longer be indebted to you for any help whatever.”

“As you please—as you please. The loss is yours, not mine. Your language, permit me to say, is, to say the least of it, intemperate—indeed, I might say imprudent. It

appears to me that we are—aha—absolutely—pardon me—quarrelling. You allow yourself on this occasion—it is not your habit, which renders it the more remarkable—you allow yourself to be carried away—hem—by—hem—passion. It is—hem—foolish.”

Val twitched her clasped hands convulsively until she almost snapped the slender fingers. She wanted to explain to her uncle that, as she felt it her duty to take part with her father in all things, and as she knew Guy Atherley hated his brother, and looked on him as an enemy, she thought it wrong to continue in her present position towards him as her master, and as the one who was to help her in her future career.

“Sir,” she again resumed, with excitement, “what I want to say is plainly this—I wish to come to some understanding with regard to the position I am to occupy in respect to you and in respect to my father.”

“Well?” said Mr. Atherley, drily.

“It is—you must be perfectly aware that it will be impossible for me to be friends with you, knowing that you hate my own father. I do not care in the least for you; I do not like you——”

“Thank you.”

“Whereas I do, I must give affection and duty to my father. I loved my father when I was a little girl, and I am prepared to love him now. If you were a stranger it might be different; but I cannot overcome my repugnance, my horror towards you as an unnatural brother.”

“Enough of this,” exclaimed Mr. Atherley, angrily, as he rose. “If you are disposed to act in an absurd fashion, it is no affair of mine. I regret that I have lost so much time with you already. I may remark that our interview has not only been highly unsatisfactory, but it has been of a singularly unexpected nature to me.”

“It is your fault——”

“Bah! Were it not completely antagonistic to my principles to say anything of an unpleasant nature to a lady, I might give you a little seasonable advice. However, philosophers tell us that wilful men must have their way, and I suppose wilful women are not more easily managed. This ridiculous scene has been entirely uncalled for. If you want to get on, take life easy, Mrs. Verner. Come,

let us part friends. I don't see the use of squabbling about nonsense."

He offered his hand with ironical civility. Val turned aside her head, too deeply angered to speak.

"Very well—very well. As you please. And pray how am I to be remunerated for all the time I have wasted on you—eh? You are a fool to your own interests."

"Is there any chance of a reconciliation ever taking place between you and my father?" demanded Val.

"Mark me. If George Atherley were hanging over the edge of a precipice, and if by extending my hand—nay, if by a word, a glance—I could save him from being dashed to pieces, I would not raise a finger, I would not pronounce a monosyllable. Nay, more; some people talk nonsense about eternal life and eternal punishment, and—you know the sort of cant—if it were true, and I were to be offered an eternity of happiness on condition of forgiving my—George Atherley—I—I would simply fling him my curse!" He spoke with the utmost apparent tranquillity.

Val shuddered, and absolutely cowered before these scathing words.

“ Yet it may afford you a curious psychological study—if I could injure him in any way by simply walking from this to the other side of the room, I would not take the trouble. I view him and his movements with the highest degree of indifference ; I care not whether he lives or dies—I care not a straw. My feelings are deep, not stormy.”

“ Oh, I cannot understand so base, so black a heart !” cried Val, looking at him with horror. “ Oh, I wish you were not my uncle. I wish you were not poor Rose’s father.”

Mr. Atherley smiled sardonically. At this moment, to the relief of both, Miss Agnes Cloutesley raised the crimson curtain which separated the front from the back drawing-room, and presented her sharp-featured visage.

“ Ah ! I beg your pardon, I’m sure,” she exclaimed, half apologetically, as she drew back. “ I thought nobody was here, as I did not hear any sound of music as I came down stairs. I shall not stay. How d’ye do, Mrs. Verner ?”

“ You need not go,” said Mr. Atherley, “ I am going out.”

“ Good morning, Miss Cloutesley,” said Val, hastily. “ I am going in a moment.”

She let her uncle Guy leave the room, not desiring to have his company on her departure; and when, on glancing from the window where she was sitting, she saw him disappear, she bade Miss Cloutesley good morning, left her compliments for Mrs. Atherley, and quitted the house, making her way as fast as possible to Rose.

Rose listened in silence to the account which she gave of the interview.

“ We are certainly not sailing in the Pacific Ocean,” observed Rose, sententiously. “ What are you going to do, now? Be quiet, Aube.”

“ I will go to my father, and tell him that I have resolved never to see Mr.—my uncle Guy again.”

“ And then?”

“ I shall leave my affairs in my father’s hands.”

“ H’m. When are you going to see your father?”

“Now. I am going to him this instant.”

“That will be better than having him coming here,” said Rose.

As Val descended the stairs, Mrs. Milburn’s reflections were not of the most soothing description. “It will certainly be pleasant if anybody, recognising her as my friend, learns that she is the daughter of a—pouf! What would Mrs. O’Connor say? Good heavens! it would go near to ruining me; and poor Frank! I wish that unfortunate man had never come to light. What a train of unlucky circumstances! Poor Val! I really pity her. What a fate!”

Val went off directly, as she had said she would, and with some little difficulty, being unused to London streets beyond her customary limited circuit, found the house where her father lived. The door was opened by a slipshod girl, who stared when Val asked for Mr. Raymond.

“Does he live here? O yes. Is he at home? Well, yes, I fancy so,” was the girl’s reply. “Will you walk in?” she added, eyeing every article of visible attire on the person of the lady visitor.

Val went into the dingy little parlour, and sat down, the slipshod servant shutting the door. In a few minutes Raymond appeared. He took both her hands in his, and kissed her forehead.

“ My darling !”

“ Dear papa !”

“ I did not expect to see you so soon. I am at home, because I was so shaken by the events of yesterday that I was afraid to go out to-day.”

“ I have seen Mr. Atherley, papa. I saw him this morning.”

“ You have seen him ? Well—and the result ?”

“ He and I quarrelled—fairly quarrelled.”

“ Then, you——”

“ Oh, I have determined never to see him again.”

“ What—what will you do ? Will not such a resolution entirely destroy your prospects—look, to give up all chance of——”

“ My prospects !” Val laughed bitterly. “ It was for a chance of living that I entered on the scheme at all—chiefly, indeed, for the sake of my boy, and that I might honestly

earn my own daily bread. Prospects ! I have none.”

Raymond covered his eyes with his thin hand without answering.

“Cruel Fortune !” he muttered.

“I want, papa, to come and live with you, if you will let me.”

“My darling !” he cried, a sudden gleam of joy lighting up his haggard, worn face. “But”—his countenance fell again—“it will be very hard for you, accustomed as you have been nearly all your life to luxury. Reflect ! The realities of my life are very harsh and forbidding. You will be compelled to relinquish all those little things which must have become necessities to you.”

“I do not care for those things. I have in reality no right to them.”

“I don’t think you could endure a life such as I, under pressure of poverty, am obliged to suffer.”

“Let me try it, and if I do not like it——”

“You would be ashamed to admit that you were tired of it, and you would suffer without having courage to say that you would wish to leave me.”

“Do not doubt me, my father. Let me do as I wish.” Raymond shook his head dubiously. “Besides, it will be a matter of necessity, if I break with Mr. Atherley, because I shall have no means of earning any money—at least not immediately, nor without grievous struggling; but while I am with you I shall have the opportunity of looking about for something to do. I cannot remain with Rose much longer—it will be impossible.”

“Be it as you will. I think I have crudely arranged a plan.”

“What is it?”

“It will be impossible for me to continue in my present line of life if you and your child are with me. It would never do. I have a trifling sum by me; I will, therefore, at once take a respectable lodgings—three rooms will be sufficient; and then—I will write to my brother Guy.”

Val looked at him with amazement.

“I shall tell him,” continued Raymond, almost fiercely, “that if he does not find me some respectable work to do, or some situation of some kind, that I will drop my present pseudonym, and reassume the name of

Atherley, which is rightly mine ; that I will no longer conceal that I am his brother—nay, that I will blazon the fact. That threat will be sufficient. A word from him will be enough to obtain for me what I want ; and I will extort from his fears what I could never get from his—ha !—brotherly affection !”

“ Do you think it possible that he would be induced to do this ?”

Raymond struck the table violently with his clenched hand.

“ He *must* comply with my demand. Then we must see if we cannot—— One thing must be thoroughly sifted—that story by which you were made the victim of a conspiracy.” Val shivered. “ Alas ! I feel myself so powerless ; but if there is any law or justice in the kingdom, you shall be righted. However, let us go on as deliberately as we can. The first step will be to change my present lodging, which—— The next, as you will have it so, my poor darling, that you and your boy come to me. Then we shall see what is to be done.”

Val left him, and retraced her steps to Rose’s house. She explained to her friend

what arrangement had been settled on, to which Rose could raise no reasonable objection. Indeed, Rose made scarcely any observation on the matter, maintaining an unusual reticence.

“ I should prefer, Val, if—if you would not say much about—hem—about your father when Frank is by. I don’t care about these things myself; but—Frank—is very—very—you know what I mean. It is hard to have to talk like this; but then, you know, your father is my uncle, so it is as bad for me as it is for you. I mean——”

“ I know what you mean, Rose. Do not be afraid. I am not so foolish as you imagine.”

“ You are not offended?”

“ Offended! My dear Rose—to conceive such a thing!”

A week had not elapsed before Val and Aubrey were with Raymond in quiet lodgings on the outskirts of Camden Town. Raymond had written to his brother, boldly, and without any kind of circumlocution, and was awaiting an answer. That answer came, in the form of a written recommendation, or warm introduction, to the manager of the Royal Middlesex

Theatre. Raymond called, and, the way having been already cleared for him by Guy Atherley, had an interview with the manager. The theatre was a decidedly shabby suburban one, and the performers in the orchestra, like the performers on the stage, were the poorest specimens of their kind; so Raymond did not find much difficulty in concluding an engagement, at a salary of twenty shillings weekly, there happening to be a vacancy at the time for a violinist, in which capacity he offered himself.

“It isn’t much,” he said to his daughter, “but it’s something. It’s respectable, too—comparatively so, I mean.”

CHAPTER IX.

A REVELATION.

VAL found, but too soon, that the words of her father were verified. She *did* find life very hard, deprived as she was of those luxuries which, from long use, she had learnt to regard as necessaries. The continual petty miseries, the perpetual worry of endeavouring to "keep things straight," the constant strain of anxiety that her father and her child should be comfortable, was so entirely new to her, unaccustomed as she was to any kind of management, and in the habit of being cared for instead of being obliged to care for others, that she felt every day as if she must give up the struggle. The only time in her whole life that she had been called on to exert her latent feminine powers for domestic rule was during the happy days when she had had her own

house to care for, and then she had enjoyed tolerably sufficient means, and everything had seemed to follow a natural routine. The poor fare, the daily torment of inventing a programme for the scanty meals, and of varying them, the darning and patching—all this combined to make Val's present lot anything but a pleasant one. There was one blessing and benefit which she derived from these minor worries of life—they drew her thoughts from the great agony of what they had hitherto been feeding on.

Indeed, had it not been for Master Aubrey's vehement complaints, she would not, perhaps, have felt the smaller miseries of her life so keenly. Not an hour—scarcely a minute—during the day passed without a series of grumblings, both loud and deep, from Aubrey. He would not consent to like his grandfather, and called him a “dirty old man” almost to his face; hunger alone compelled him to swallow the coarse fare which was offered him; he was perpetually asking for Rose, for his own papa, when they were going home—he and Val; and other highly inconvenient questions. The fear lest he should say any of

these things—which he often did—in the presence of her father, was another torment.

She did not see Rose now. It would never do, Rose said, for them to be seen together, because—— Well, Val knew why. But they wrote to each other occasionally ; there was no harm in that, Rose said. Aubrey, finding that grumbling made no perceptible difference in the surrounding state of affairs, began to droop, and nearly drove his mother to distraction with the dread that he was going to be ill, or—or that she would lose him. She mentioned this new fear in one of her letters to Rose, written about three weeks after she had come to stay with her father, and the result was (for Rose was always practical, and never let time slip by) that Aubrey went to pay a visit of no particular limitation to his cousin's nice house. This satisfied all parties ; Val was glad to have him safe and well cared for ; her father agreed to whatever she seemed to think advisable ; Rose was exceedingly fond of the child, and had been sorry to give him up ; her husband never offered the slightest objection to any of her whims, and Aubrey

was rejoiced to have his luxuries again. The poor child was not selfish, even if he appeared to be so. He was not aware that he must quit his mother more or less definitively, and only comprehended that he liked the house Rose lived in, and what he got there for dinner, and so on; but he did not perfectly understand that he would now see his poor mother at very rare intervals, and then only, it was arranged, for a few minutes in the Park.

So Aubrey was removed, and if one joy was taken from her, one sorrow was also spared Val.

The dull round was little varied, and Val saw few people. Not that she wished for any company, it is true. The house was rented by a respectable man and his wife—or rather, by a respectable woman and her husband, for Mrs. Anthony was in reality the proprietor, and held sway over the entire establishment. There were a couple of children—noisy, loud-voiced imps, a boy and girl—who were always playing in the narrow piece of ground, called, in ironical pleasantry, “the garden”—a small square section of earth, geologically arranged,

an undulating flat region, with all the bleakness of a morsel of moorland, without any of its picturesque beauty. Val's father was away the greater part of the day, and when at home he was not very good company, being generally moody and silent, and he was necessarily absent from six or seven until twelve at night.

The weight on Val's heart grew heavier and heavier. She yearned day by day to hear something of her husband—of Aubrey Verner. A feeling of being bound in icy fetters oppressed her more drearily every day; even the happiness of having her child with her was now denied: it seemed as if everything must be torn from her. The wretched routine of cleaning the poor rooms in which she and her father lived, of darning, patching, mending, of getting the meals, of marketing, did not suffice to distract her mind from her painful thoughts, perpetually hovering, vulture-like, around her; and, her work ended, she had not a book to read, for the house was utterly destitute of such a luxury.

Val reproached herself with not loving her father more deeply. Self-reproaches, reproaches

of any kind, never induce love. She knew that her father loved her tenderly, lavished all the resources of a naturally affectionate heart upon her ; and yet—and yet——”

She could not disguise from herself that, although she had always yearned to meet her father, that she was—yes, now that her longing was granted, she was disappointed.

Disappointed ? What had she expected ?

Her anticipations had been so vague. She certainly had not (from the time of Lady Charrington's explanation) expected him to be rich, or anything but a humble man, in the lowest walks of life. But her heart grew heavier, and she recoiled within herself, and gave scarcely any love back for the affection which her father freely lavished on her.

Poor Raymond felt that his daughter—the child whom he adored—shrank from him. This saddened but did not embitter him. He was wise enough to leave it to time to produce a reaction in her feelings.

Val's nerves became so shaken at this time that she was in a perpetual flutter. A knock, the sudden clang of a door closing abruptly, a cry in the street, an unexpected step on the

stairs, set her heart beating, and made her tremble for many minutes.

She had been with her father several weeks when a terrible revelation was flashed on her.

One evening she was sitting alone, brooding over her fate—thinking of Aubrey Verner, of her child, of her brief happiness, and of the capricious destiny to which she had almost always been a victim. She had lighted the small lamp which they generally used, and had laid the neat tray, with its cups and saucers, and had spread such dainties as she could command for the evening's tea.

The evening was cold, so she kindled a small fire, drew the curtain, and made the room look as cheerful as she could.

She had just taken up a piece of needlework, and was busily stitching, when the step of her father was heard on the stairs.

She listened. Something in the way in which he was mounting the stairs smote on her ears. As she listened, her heart began its ominous throbbing. She rose quickly, and taking the lamp, ran to the head of the narrow flight leading from the passage to the rooms in the upper part of the house. The staircase

was so built that from one landing, you could not see what was passing on the next. Val was therefore obliged to descend to the second landing. Her eyes soon pierced the darkness, and she saw her father stumbling up, stair by stair.

“Papa,” she cried, “are you—are you hurt—have you—papa—”

Raymond lifted his head as she called to him.

“I’m—all righsh,” he answered, in a thick voice. “Wait a—a mil—milute.”

Val held the light so that he might be able to see his way. She was startled by his strange voice and the manner in which he spoke. As she waited, however, he mounted laboriously, clinging to the bannisters with an evident effort.

When he had reached the landing where Val stood, she hastily ran back, placed the lamp on the table, where its beams could illumine the landing through the open door, and then flew to assist her father.

“Father—papa,” she exclaimed, in a thrilling tone of vague fear, “I am sure you are ill. Dear papa—what is the matter? Lean on me. Papa, papa, speak to me.”

Raymond leaned against the balustrade at the top of the staircase, and stared almost stupidly at her. Val put her arms round his neck, and looked in his face. It was as pale as death, and his glance was so shifting that she could not catch his eye.

“Dear, dear papa, come in,” she whispered, trying to take him by the arm and lead him into the little sitting room. She was trembling as if with ague.

Raymond looked at her, then his eyes sank.

“Poor chile,” he said, “poor little dev’—poor little wresh.”

“Do not pity me, papa. I am quite strong. Oh, what shall I do? Do, do, *do* come in. Are you—how do you feel—what is the matter? Oh, I wonder—I wish—oh, what *shall* I do? *Do* come in, papa.”

He yielded to her persuasion, and at last staggered into the room, half guided, half walking unsteadily towards a chair, into which he fell.

Val sank on her knees before him, and looked in his face. His eyes opened and closed, and he looked stupidly, with a kind of commiserating air, at her, as she knelt at his

feet, with white lips and distended eyes. He rocked to and fro, and endeavoured to speak, but vainly.

“Shall I go for a doctor? Shall I—you are so ill. How did you reach home? He does not hear me—I—”

“I hear you,” answered her father, quietly, suddenly looking at her with sharp intelligence, but almost instantly relapsing into his stupid state.

“Then, tell me, papa, what—let me chafe your hands. No, they are burning. Your forehead and cheeks are burning like fire.” She passed her cool hands over his face, which evidently pleased the supposed invalid, for when she withdrew them, he made an effort to catch her hands, and to lay his forehead against them.

Val started up, and ran lightly downstairs. She tapped at the door of the parlour, which was opened by the landlady.

“Mrs. Anthony,” she cried, rapidly, “will you—will you come up to my room for a moment? My father is ill—perhaps dying. Can you come up now?”

The good woman, who was very obliging,

and really a kind-hearted body, followed her as she ran upstairs again. Raymond was sitting exactly as she had left him, only he seemed to have fallen into a semi-fainting state.

“Look at him, Mrs. Anthony,” cried Val, in terror. “Look at him. What is the matter with him? Where can I find a doctor? Would your little boy go for one, my dear Mrs. Anthony?”

Her voice was quivering with anguish. Mrs. Anthony looked at Raymond, and then at her.

“Is it possible,” she said, speaking with much gravity, “can it be possible that you do not know what is really the matter with him?”

“No—is it—is it a fit?” asked Val, in a low voice, her blood curdling with terror.

Mrs. Anthony looked at her steadily, as if trying to ascertain if she was truly ignorant.

“Poor girl,” she said, at last, in a pitying voice. “I suppose you have never seen anybody in this state before.”

She suddenly took Raymond by the shoulder, and shook him violently. Val was about to exclaim against this, but thought it better

to wait until the superior wisdom of her good friend should show her what to do. Mrs. Anthony's method of awakening Raymond from his stupor took no effect, however, nor had she intended it for anything but an ebullition of anger.

"Don't you know that he is *drunk?* " she demanded, turning to Val.

Raymond uttered a sepulchral grunt, as if indignant at the charge brought against him.

"It is not true," cried Val, after a moment of supreme horror. "It is false—"

"Is it false?" answered the woman, in an ironical tone, addressing herself to Raymond. "Is it untrue, you dirty, snoring pig? Eh, tell me that," she cried, shaking him. "I pity you, really, my dear young lady—for I know that you are a lady. I only hope he doesn't do this kind of thing often, and I suppose," she added, "I suppose that he can neverhave done so before, or you would not have been ignorant of the nature of his illness."

Val shuddered, and, drawing back, rested against the table for support. Suddenly she ran to the door, and closed it, as if instinctively to shield her father's disgrace. Could it be possible?

Standing by the table, her face above the level of the lamp, which threw weird shadows, her eyes burning out from her pale face, she looked the picture of despair.

“What am I to do?” she asked, in a voice so low and trembling that Mrs. Anthony could scarcely catch the sentence.

It was pitiful to see her in this new humiliation.

“Do? Why, let him sleep it off as best he may. He’ll be all right in the morning. Bless you, I was used to it with my first. He *was* a pig.”

“But,” said Val, holding up her hands as if to shield herself from a blow, “he will take cold.”

“Cold! Well, let him.”

“You cannot be so unfeeling. Tell me—I know nothing about it.”

“So much the better—or so much the worse, as you may think. Well, I’ll tell you what you can do: put him on this sofa here, and cover him with a blanket, and let him sleep it off.”

She good-naturedly ran into the adjoining room, and returned with a blanket.

“You generally sleep here, miss, but you can

take your father's room for to-night, you know ; and then—bless you, he'll be all right in the morning—as fresh as a daisy. And if I were you, I wouldn't make much of a fuss about it, as it only aggravates 'em. I never can keep cool myself, or never could, that is, with my first, because Mr. A. is a model, seeing as how his health wouldn't allow him to make free with himself, being delicate ; but for all that, it's foolish to take much notice. I don't want to be unkind, either, miss ; but I must tell you that, if your father does this sort of thing often, you will have to look out for other lodgings, as these apartments is very select, and I can't afford to have such goings on, and I don't know where they'd put up with 'em, I'm sure."

Val scarcely heard what she was saying, and was in such a stupor, such a state of horror, that she was unable to move or speak. Mrs. Anthony, although she had counselled placing Raymond on the sofa, did not know very well how her advice was to be carried out, and stood contemplating the half-sleeping man with a face indicative of the most profound disgust.

"I really don't see how it is to be done," said the good woman, at length, in despair.

“ It’s like trying to move a mountain, or the Monument, dragging about a man in that state.”

As she spoke, Raymond suddenly raised his head, and looked about him with eyes like those of a somnambulist. He evidently did not observe either his daughter or Mrs. Anthony, although he muttered some words aloud.

“ Vey cole—” shivering as he spoke. “ *Mush go t’ bed.*”

He staggered forward a few steps, then, suddenly touching the edge of the sofa, sank down in a heap. Mrs. Anthony seized the opportunity to fling the blanket over him. He received this warm covering with a subdued grunt of satisfaction.

“ He wont be likely to move now until morning. I pity you from my heart, my dear young lady, I do indeed,” said Mrs. Anthony, looking at the unhappy girl, who stood with a stricken face indicative of unutterable anguish. “ It may seem cruel to say so to you; but really, if this sort of thing occurs again, you and your father must look out for another place.”

Val clasped her hands, and lowered her head,

without uttering a word in reply. She felt as if degradation had no deeper abyss.

“Good night, ma’am.” Val did not answer, and the woman left her, softly closing the door as she went.

As the sound of Mrs. Anthony’s step died away, Val slowly approached the spot where her father was lying.

Her father!

She fixed her eyes steadily on him, though she shuddered.

With a strange feeling of desolation, she crept closer to him—closer, until she was so near that she could almost touch his form. Then she knelt down at the foot of the couch, and her head sank until her cold forehead rested on the folds of the blanket in which her father was wrapped. The disturbed breathing of Raymond alone broke the profound silence in that gloomy chamber. The table was still arranged for tea, the lamp was burning, but for hours there was no sound beyond that deep, horrid breathing.

The oil with which the lamp was supplied was becoming exhausted, and the wick, growing dry, began to cast nothing but flickering rays. The room was plunged in a

dismal semi-darkness, with spectral shadows and sudden phantom lights. At last the moon, which did not rise till late, flung a flood of silvery light into the chamber—a flood which surged in between the curtains which the hasty passing to and fro of Mrs. Anthony had drawn back. The light fell on the sleeping figure of Raymond, and on the kneeling form of his daughter, who knelt with her face buried in the blanket covering his prostrate body.

CHAPTER X.

THE RESULT OF ROSE'S SUGGESTION.

COLONEL GORDON had just returned to England. For some months he had been away, shaking the sands of the great hour-glass at various places on the Continent. It must be confessed that he had resorted to Paris and Baden-Baden, chiefly to throw off a feeling of weariness which had beset him on losing his nephew, and to try to escape from an uncomfortable sensation that he had not acted quite well to that young man. Although not by any means superstitious—very far from it, indeed—he had lately fallen into a habit of imagining that wherever he turned, he saw Aubrey's eyes fixed reproachfully on him; and despite his efforts to fling aside the phantom, it threatened to become a painful

accompaniment to his waking as well as sleeping fancies.

“The fact is,” he muttered one morning to himself, soon after his return to London, as he sipped his chocolate, “I am growing old. Confound the boy, why couldn’t he fall into my schemes for his benefit?”

On this particular morning, the poor Colonel was in unusually depressed spirits, discontented, hipped. He was in an especial unfit state for the receipt of bad news.

His servant brought him his letters and papers, for, albeit a late riser, the Colonel made it a strict rule never to read in bed. He tossed over the letters, opened them, glanced at the contents of some, threw others aside with a muttered “Pooh!” and had nearly disposed of the little heap when one, in a familiar hand, caught his eye. The envelope was deeply bordered with black, but as the Colonel was not a superstitious man, this did not affect him.

“Maryon! I wonder my nephew has not written. Very undutiful of him, I must say. Maryon has lost a relative.”

He broke the seal in a leisurely manner.

The letter was from one of Aubrey's brother officers, who had gone with the regiment to China. Captain Maryon had not known Aubrey Verner long, but he had been acquainted with Colonel Gordon for many years, and had been with him in India.

The letter was closely written, and gave a vivid sketch of a battle which had taken place near Hong Kong, and in which the regiment, newly arrived, had greatly distinguished itself. Captain Maryon's own brother had been slain whilst defending his flag. The Captain, having spoken of things in which Colonel Gordon was not personally interested, gradually broke the intelligence that Captain Verner had been wounded almost unto death in the course of the battle, so seriously wounded that he had lain for hours on the field among the dead, and was at last only by accident found to be still breathing, and then carried to hospital. It was doubtful, Captain Maryon added, in cautious language, whether he would recover or not.

Colonel Gordon read this letter through. Not a muscle of his face moved as his eye slowly travelled through the hastily scribbled

lines ; but his hand trembled so much that the paper rattled in the silence of the cosy chamber where the Colonel was sitting.

When he had finished reading the letter, his hand dropped on the table, the fingers still clasping the paper with a nervous clutch. For full ten minutes or more, he remained utterly motionless, leaning back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the window, through which he gazed on the sunny sky beyond.

“ My boy—my boy,” he cried at last, striking the table with such violence that the eggshell china and the silver vessels jingled. He could say no more ; the air seemed stifling, and he rose, still holding the letter, and began walking to and fro.

The thought that perhaps even now Aubrey might be dead—lying in his sepulchre in that far away land—dead, that he would never see him more, was dreadful—insupportable. Strangely enough, although he ought to have foreseen the possible contingencies of war, the idea of Aubrey’s being killed, or even severely wounded, had never once occurred to him. Yet, with that curious contradiction of sorrow, he felt as if he scarcely suffered acute anguish.

He felt the keenest grief—despair, and yet, it seemed to him that he could have burst out laughing, as at some jest.

He could not realize it. He continued walking up and down the room like a caged tiger, endeavouring to realize what he had been told. Told—for it seemed as if a piercing voice had screamed the fatal news into his ear.

Dying—perhaps dead! Dead—aye, by dint of repeating that one fixed idea, he was arriving at a clear perception of this dreadful blow. The thought was utterly intolerable. The more he meditated, the greater grew his sense of anguish—real anguish, such as he had never suffered in his life before. True, while Aubrey had been with him, he had endeavoured to coerce him into a marriage which the young man had declared to be hateful to him; but then, it was chiefly for the young Captain's own benefit, although partly for the sake of transmitting a magnificent estate and an ancient title to future descendants. And now—if he could only have this beloved nephew back he would relinquish everything: Aubrey should do as he liked,—he would agree to anything Aubrey wished.

It was too late. Too late ! Ah, how these words strike colder than ice—hotter than fire. Too late—the burden of many a song of lamentation—many a wail of vain regret.

The Colonel at length rang his bell with violence. His man appeared at the door.

“I must dress. I want to go out. I don’t feel well.”

Abbott, his servant, looked at him, and was really grieved to see him so pale and haggard.

“No bad news, sir, I hope ?” he asked, respectfully.

“What business is it of yours, I should like to know ?” thundered the Colonel. “What the devil—it’s like your impudence. Bad news—yes,—my nephew, Captain Verner, is dead, or dying. I suppose you’d call that bad news—eh ?” he demanded, passionately.

The man tried to look shocked or grieved at the intelligence, and failed signally.

“Yes—much you care. Come, make haste. I want to go out. I am wretched, miserable. What an infernal nuisance it is that people have loves and likings——”

He recommenced walking to and fro, in a tempest of impatient grief.

“What the devil do you stand there for, gaping like a brainless idiot?” he cried, suddenly turning on his man with a shower of oaths.

“I thought you was going to dress, sir.”

“Yes, yes. Right, so I was.” He passed into his dressing-room, followed by the man ; and in about half-an-hour came forth, dressed for riding.

His horse was waiting for him ; he sprang into the saddle with the lightness of a man of twenty, and dashed off, followed by his groom. He rode through the park, and then turned homewards. As he was passing along Piccadilly, he saw a carriage approaching.

The occupant of this carriage was Lady Charrington, who had also returned to England, radiant with beauty and good spirits.

The Colonel, who had become acquainted with the Countess during his sojourn on the Continent, raised his hat as he was about to pass. Suddenly the high-spirited horses attached to the carriage reared, plunged, and then quieted under the firm hand of the coachman. But their unexpected action startled the horse which the Colonel was riding, and the animal started off so abruptly that he was un-

able to pull her up. Lady Charrington sprang up in terror, and looked with distended eyes at what must be the imminent danger of the Colonel; but the horse and its rider flew with such velocity that they were speedily out of sight. Lady Charrington clasped her hands in real terror.

“Ah, mon Dieu, mon Dieu!” she cried, falling back in her carriage, “how terrible it will be if—” she shuddered. “Turn round and follow him, if you can,” she cried to the coachman.

Colonel Gordon, his nerves unstrung by the news he had received that morning, and irritated by the flight of his horse, lost his usual self-command, and found himself unable to curb the high-spirited animal. The horse flew along the crowded thoroughfare, then suddenly dashed at the railings surrounding the Green Park, as if determined to spring over. She leaped into the air, and the next instant Colonel Gordon was lying half under the creature, whose hind legs had caught, and who had toppled over.

The Colonel’s groom, who had followed his master as closely as he could, arrived in time

to see him fall. Just as the crowd began to collect, Lady Charrington's carriage came up.

Chester, the groom, on lifting his master, found that he was perfectly insensible, and of course grew bewildered. The members of the assembled crowd volunteered all kinds of contradictory advice, and were counselling the most impossible things, until Lady Charrington, who scarcely knew what to do, sent her footman to order Chester to carry his master to her carriage and place him therein. With the help of Lady Charrington's servant, this was speedily accomplished, and Colonel Gordon was already being driven in the direction of his own house, when a policeman appeared. Lady Charrington had tossed a card to the groom, telling him that she would be answerable for what she would do with Colonel Gordon, and she desired him to do what he could for the wounded horse.

The Countess left Colonel Gordon in the hands of his people at the house where he had his suite of apartments, and then drove home.

The results of his fall were serious. His left arm was broken, and his frame was shaken

to such an extent that the physicians who were called in looked grave and ominous.

There was an account of this accident in all the morning papers of the next day, contained in a brief paragraph. It happened that Rose saw this paragraph as she sat at breakfast with her husband. Almost the moment she read it, having hastily explained to Frank, she rushed up to her room, put on her bonnet and shawl, dressed little Aubrey, went out, took a cab, and dashed off, regardless of consequences, to the lodgings of her friend Val.

This was the morning after that terrible revelation. Raymond was absent. Val was sitting, listlessly, at the window of the shabby room, when Rose burst in, leading Master Aubrey by the hand. Val started up in surprise.

“ You here !” she cried.

“ Yes. Aube, kiss your mother. Yes, I am here, and you would never guess, if I gave you from to-day till this day next year, what has brought me here.”

Val was straining her child to her breast. The little boy was evidently much pleased at seeing his mother, and was returning her kisses with some vehemence.

“Your uncle-in-law, the Colonel, has been nearly killed by a fall from his horse. Now, I don’t believe he has any female relatives who are sufficiently disinterested to go and nurse him. Suppose you perform that kind office.”

“Rose!” exclaimed Val.

“Yes. I mean what I say. It will be all right, and then you will have so many opportunities of endearing yourself to the old boy, if he has any heart. He can’t help liking you. And if he choose to die, why then you must be guided by circumstances.”

“But—you are so sudden, Rose. My heart is beating.”

“I can’t help that. I haven’t much time to spare. It is a most praiseworthy act, my coming to you at all. But I couldn’t wait. If I had not come in a cab, I should have been out of breath. Quick—decide.”

“My father—”

“Your father! Well, what about him? He has been used to manage for himself for years, and I suppose he isn’t such an over-grown baby that he can’t be left to himself for a few days. He can’t be allowed to stand in your way: besides, I don’t suppose he would. How wretchedly pale you are, Val. You look like

a ghost. I'm afraid your strength would not allow of your going."

"Yes—no—it isn't that."

"Well, make up your mind. Say to them that you are his daughter—no, that wouldn't do, as he has never been married. Oh, tell them you are his niece. I dare say they will be glad of any help. Nursing isn't a particularly agreeable duty. But you must make up your mind speedily, otherwise, whilst you are hemming and hawing, the old boy will either die or recover."

Val leant back in her chair, still holding Aubrey in her arms, and passed her hand over her thin face.

"But, if he recovers, and finds that I am—the wife of his nephew—his—the—"

"He couldn't kill you, silly coward, I suppose. I know enough of law and justice to be able to tell you that. I only wish Frank had been the nephew of a rich man. I'd never have been squeamish or cowardly in trying to work my way into the old man's good graces. The only thing he can do is to turn you out of doors, and then you will be no worse off than you are now."

She continued to argue with Val until her

young friend's fears and scruples gave way ; and then she left her, taking away Aubrey. In the evening, when Raymond came home to tea, she spoke to him about Rose's proposition. There was a certain chill in the manner of both father and daughter, and both were secretly pleased at the prospect of the temporary separation to which this would lead. Shame on one side, grief and indignation on the other, had for the time being snapped the links of affection.

Val wrote a few lines to Rose, which had the effect of bringing that decided individual to her side in a few hours. Rose proposed that they should go direct to the house where the Colonel was lying ill, and as Val placed herself in the hands of her friend, they were soon in a cab on their way.

When they alighted, Val was trembling.

"It doesn't signify," said Rose, noticing this fact. "They will imagine that you are overcome by grief."

As they were waiting for admittance, a brougham dashed up and stopped at the door. From it sprang Dr. Edwards, the physician who had attended Lady Charrington when she

had been ill in the country. Val had become a great favourite with the fashionable London physician during his stay at the Countess' country seat. He recognised her in a moment, and, addressing her, shook hands warmly with her.

As they were speaking, the door was opened, and the three passed in. Val had hastily introduced Rose to the physician, and they went upstairs to the drawing-room.

“How does it happen that I see you here?” enquired Dr. Edwards. “Are you related to Colonel Gordon? Pardon me, if the inquiry is a rude one.”

Val, in a faint voice, explained to him why they had come. The worthy physician, surprised at her story, passed his hand thoughtfully over his face two or three times. She omitted, from the history which she gave, the fact that she had been led to suppose herself not really the wife of Captain Verner.

Dr. Edwards was secretly pleased to find that he would now obtain the assistance of some one actively interested in the welfare of his patient.

“For,” as he acknowledged to the two

ladies, “servants, no matter how attached they may be to a master, are never so tender or so unremitting in their care or attention as one who is keenly anxious for the recovery of the invalid. And I will not conceal from you, my dear madam, the fact that my patient is in a most critical state. I cannot say, at present, how the case may turn out; but I have very serious misgivings—very serious, indeed—ahem!”

There was no one to dispute with Val the right to take the part of chief nurse; and she accordingly installed herself. Rose, with much encouraging counsel, departed, leaving her with the Doctor and his almost insensible patient.

Val was an excellent nurse, as she had already proved herself to be in that time, now seemingly far, far away, when she had nursed Lady Charrington through her fever. She waited on the uncle of her husband with the devotion of a daughter, scarcely leaving his bedside even for needful repose. Dr. Edwards, who was aware of the fact that the Colonel was still ignorant of her existence, was surprised at this devotion, and expressed his ad-

miration in no measured terms. He confessed that if the Colonel recovered, it would be in a great measure due to her unremitting care.

Days passed, and Colonel Gordon lay in a precarious situation. He was in a raging fever, which, at his age, and considering the shock which his system had received, was doubly dangerous.

At last, however, the crisis passed, and he began to mend rapidly.

Now that he was in a fair way to regain his senses, Val was in a state of great terror, not knowing how he would regard her presence. She glided like a shadow round him, every moment dreading to see him fix an indignant eye upon her, and perhaps order her to quit the house.

The anticipated moment arrived. She was hovering about him, ready to minister to his requirements, and trying to keep as much out of sight as she could, when she was startled by his voice.

“Who is there?” he demanded. “Is that you, Abbott?”

She trembled, and dared not—could not move.

“Who is there? Speak!” repeated the invalid, querulously. “Come here, directly.”

She slowly advanced within the range of his vision. He gazed at her with the utmost astonishment, and was so surprised that he was unable to speak for several minutes. Val heard the clock on the chimney-piece ticking, and felt as if each stroke was smiting her with a heavy hand.

“Who are you?” asked the Colonel, at length, looking at her. “How did you come here? I suppose I have been ill—but how do you happen to—”

A notion suddenly occurred to him. This was evidently a niece of his landlady. Having settled the matter to his satisfaction, he looked again at her.

Val wondered that his surprise had subsided so suddenly, and remained waiting for him to speak. His next words, however, were of a nature totally different to what she expected.

“Where is my valet?”

“Sir, I think—I do not know.”

“Ah. Highly satisfactory, and characteristic of the female sex. Well, I want him, if you please. No matter. You need not ring.

I suppose he will re-appear when it suits his convenience."

He closed his eyes, and lay quiet. Val retired to the opposite side of the room, where he could not see her, and sat down, almost vexed by this anti-climax.

Presently Dr. Edwards appeared, and Val quitted the chamber. Colonel Gordon immediately instituted an inquiry regarding the cause of his illness, and demanded a full account of all that had happened, which the physician gave, although cautioning him against exciting himself by talking.

"By the way," suddenly asked the Colonel, "who is that interesting young person whom I saw just now?"

Dr. Edwards, who perceived that no explanation had been come to, was embarrassed and knew not what to say. His manner surprised Colonel Gordon, who looked at him with a puzzled air.

"Is there any mystery? She is not your daughter, Dr. Edwards?"

"No. Oh, no."

"You do not answer my question. Who is she?"

“She is——” Dr. Edwards was sorely perplexed. “Perhaps it would be better for her to answer that question herself, my dear fellow. I cannot say that I don’t know, but I don’t feel at liberty to repeat what she has mentioned to me.”

“What the deuce is this mystery? I thought she was the daughter of some of the people about the house, though I admit she looks an exceedingly lady-like young woman.”

Dr. Edwards left him almost immediately; and meeting Val in the antechamber, told her that the Colonel’s suspicions had been aroused.

“I was entirely at a loss what to say,” he added, “therefore I left him unanswered. I did not feel justified in betraying your confidence, as I did not know what steps you intended to take. Do not agitate yourself, and, above all, do not agitate my patient. This I must impress most particularly on your mind. Remember, his life depends on the most perfect tranquillity being preserved. I already regret having dissipated his first idea that you were the daughter of some one in the house.”

“Then,” cried Val, who was as pale as death, “I dare not remain in his room. He

will be sure to ask me, and I could not refuse to answer him, because if I do, it will seem so strange."

"True. But I think it would positively endanger his life to have any explanations which might lead to the slightest excitement. What a donkey I was to betray that there was any secret."

"Then, can I be spared? I will go away at once."

"I think that will be the wisest course. Abbott will now be able to attend to him. Good-bye, my dear Mrs. Verner. I am sorry for your painful position; but pardon me, I have no right to obtrude my sympathy upon you."

Val thanked him, offered him her hand, which he pressed between his with parental kindness; and then she fled upstairs to the small apartment which had been devoted to her use. She dressed herself, packed up the few articles which she had brought with her, and set the room in order.

Going downstairs, she gave some explanations to the servants on her way, and passed into the street. On gaining the corner, she

hesitated for a few minutes, and then resolved on seeking counsel of Rose.

To her vexation, Rose was not at home when she reached her house, and she was obliged to wait for about an hour. She had not even the happiness of passing that time with her child, for Rose had taken him with her. At length, however, Rose appeared with Master Aubrey, who looked radiant with health and spirits.

Rose could not repress her astonishment at seeing Val, who was about the last person, she said, she anticipated finding there. Val hastily explained to her that she had been obliged to quit Colonel Gordon, because she dared not give him the clue to her identity which he would be certain to demand.

“I am now going back to my father,” she said. “My darling little pet! how well he looks,” she added, gazing fondly at Aubrey, who was enfolded in her arms.

At Rose’s earnest invitation, Val stayed to partake of luncheon. Rose was greatly vexed by this unexpected termination to her scheme, but had no tangible proposition to make; and, after some conversation, Val returned to her father’s humble residence.

Raymond was not at home when she entered the poor little rooms, which seemed doubly shabby after the superb apartments of Colonel Gordon and of Rose Milburn. She lighted the fire, and got out the tea-things in readiness for her father. He came in at his usual time, and was greatly surprised to see her there. Val explained to him the reason of her hasty return, and then they sat down to tea.

Some days elapsed—dull, monotonous days. Then Val one morning received a note, enclosed in one from Rose, who expressed her belief that it was from Colonel Gordon or from Dr. Edwards. Val had given Rose's address to Dr. Edwards one day during the time she was nursing her husband's uncle.

The note was from Dr. Edwards, who informed her that Colonel Gordon so obstinately persisted on knowing who she was that he was compelled to give way to him, and that, as the Colonel was now sufficiently strong to bear the excitement of the revelation, he thought it would be wise to call upon him, and tell him everything—if she felt disposed to do so.

The note arrived by the first delivery, half-past eight; and Val was sitting at breakfast

with her father when Mrs. Anthony's little girl came up and tapped at the door to give it to her. She read both notes, and then silently passed them to her father, who also read them.

“What shall you do?” he asked, returning them.

“I don't know, papa. What would you advise me to do?”

“Go and see Colonel Gordon, and hear what he has to say.”

“I feel so terrified, papa, at the prospect of the interview. I don't like having to tell him—I don't know what he will say. Besides, you know”—she buried her face in her hands, then raised her head again—“you know I thought—that—perhaps, you know, I am not his—his wife after—after all.”

“Tell him everything,” answered her father.

She dressed herself, and went off to the Colonel's house. By this time Colonel Gordon had so far recovered that he was able to go into his sitting-room. He was lying on a sofa when Val was announced. As she entered the apartment, her exceedingly elegant air struck his fastidious eye, and, rising, he offered her a

chair. She sank into it, and then looked at him in silence.

“So, madam, I find from Dr. Edwards that I in reality owe my life to you. Permit me to thank you, and then to demand to whom I am indebted?”

“Sir—Colonel Gordon—I——” She was so pale that he thought she was about to swoon, and he hastened to offer her some wine and water which stood on a small table near him. She was about to decline the glass, but felt so perfectly faint that she was obliged to accept it and drink some of the contents. Colonel Gordon gazed at her for several minutes.

“I feel certain, from your manner, and from the secrecy which my friend Dr. Edwards maintains, that there is some mystery. Why should you come and nurse me through a severe illness with such devotion unless you had some special interest in me; and what I desire to ascertain is, from whence arises this interest, and who are you, who display so much anxiety to snatch me from the grave. Come, do not be frightened. What have I done that you should regard me with those

large terror-stricken eyes. I am not an ogre. Come, throw off your alarm, and speak to me with frankness."

"If I tell you who I am, or why I felt it my duty to come to nurse you, you will never forgive me."

"I don't understand you, my child. What is your name?"

"My name is—was—is Raymond."

"Indeed. And how does it happen that I have excited so much kindly interest in your heart?"

"Sir—"

She suddenly rose, and advancing towards him, threw herself on her knees before him, to his great astonishment and evident embarrassment.

"Madam, I beseech you—"

"Colonel Gordon, I claim to be the wife of your nephew, Aubrey Verner."

He had extended his hands to raise her, but as these words escaped her lips, he drew them back, and sat down, staring at her with a glance in which wonder, incredulity, and a multitude of emotions were expressed.

"The wife of my nephew!" he cried. "Of Aubrey Verner?"

He covered his face with his left hand, resting the right on the edge of the sofa. Val remained on her knees before him, scarcely daring to breathe,

“How long have you—when were you married?” he asked, looking at her again.

“We were married three years ago.”

“Where?”

“At Brighton.”

“Clandestinely?”

“Yes.”

A profound silence ensued.

“When did you hear last from—from Captain Verner?”

Val bowed her head.

“Not since he went away,” she replied, in a stifled voice.

“How do you account for that?”

“You speak so kindly, that I am encouraged to tell you the truth. I—” She poured forth, in a torrent of passionate words, the story of the deception which had been practised on her, her flight, and how she had come to London in a state bordering on lunacy.

“Poor child,” he said, when she had finished, “poor child. I can tell you this for your comfort, that everything which that woman told

was false. I ought to know, as I am his uncle and nearest relative."

Val, in a transport of gratitude, seized his hands, and covered them with tears and kisses

"Rise, rise,—I insist upon it," he said, withdrawing his hands from her clasp.

Val obeyed him, and re-seated herself.

"Then you are ignorant that Aubrey Verner has been dangerously wounded, and is now, even now, perhaps—" He was unable to proceed. His voice quivered with grief.

"Wounded!" cried Val, in a tone of agony. "Wounded! Perhaps?—what—you do not mean—O no, no, no. Dangerously wounded? Ah, no, no."

She clasped her hands in an agony, and burst into tears, which Colonel Gordon did not attempt to check.

"Yes," he said, "he is now, perhaps, dead."

"O, no, no. Do not—do not say that. You rend my heart."

Colonel Gordon bent his gaze on the floor, and reflected.

"Have you any children?" he asked.

"Yes; one. A boy."

“A boy?” repeated the Colonel, eagerly.

“My little Aubrey.”

“I will not disown you—I will not refuse to acknowledge you, but offer you my hand across what may be my poor nephew’s grave.” Colonel Gordon’s voice was now husky from repressed sobs, as he stretched out his hand, which Val clasped in both hers.

“Where is your child?”

“With a friend.”

“Not living with you?”

“No,” replied Val, hesitating.

Colonel Gordon divined that she was now supporting herself by some petty occupation, and was being assisted by some friend, who took charge of her child.

“I should like—can I see him?”

“If you please to do so.”

“Send him, or bring him here to-day. Will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is he a pretty boy—is he like—like our poor Aubrey?”

Tears alone answered this inquiry; but Val, seeing his impatience to behold his grand-nephew, rose and left him, saying

that she would go, and return with her child.

When she told Rose what had happened, her friend was in a state of indescribable triumphant delight at the success of her scheme. Rose dressed Aubrey in his smartest attire, and he looked like a little prince when he was ready to go with his mother; for she had purchased the best frocks, stockings, hats, boots, and other necessary articles of boyish equipment that could be obtained for money. Aubrey, who was a vain little mortal, strutted off with the air of a juvenile monarch, eyeing his scarlet stockings and bronze kid boots and knicker-bocker suit with the utmost complacency.

To save time, Val took him in a cab to the house of his grand-uncle, to whom she presented him with pardonable pride.

Colonel Gordon took the child on his knee without saying a word, and looked at him—looked straight into his eyes. The child, frightened by the fierce aspect of the old warrior, pouted his lip, and twisted his pretty face as if meditating a good cry.

“Darling—darling,” murmured the old man, bending his bronzed visage until his forehead

touched the soft rosy cheek of the little boy.

Aubrey, not knowing very well what this was all about, could not resolve on what course to pursue—whether to cry or to remain perfectly silent. As he was pleased with the fine room in which he found himself, however, and with the noble air of the old man whose arms encircled him, and as he also saw that Val seemed quite tranquil, and did not display any terror of the old gentleman with the gray moustache, Aubrey thought it would be best to wait until he could see his way more clearly. Finally, he became so emboldened that he took hold of the watch-guard which his new friend wore, and examined some bright trinkets which were attached to it.

In truth, the two were soon on terms of intimate friendship, and the Colonel was so pleased with his new-found grand-nephew that he could hardly let him depart. With his usual decision, he resolved that he would acknowledge Val as the wife of his nephew, and he told her so. It was fortunate for her that the joy of being thus recognised, and the assurance that she was in reality the wife of Aubrey Verner,

broke in some measure the tide of grief which she experienced on hearing that he was ill—*perhaps* even dead.

“Tell me one thing more. You said that your child does not live with you? How is this? You are, I suppose, reduced to poverty through a series of misfortunes? Where are you living, and with whom?”

Val hesitated, not daring to tell him the true state of her affairs. After a moment’s reflection, however, she thought that it would be best to tell him everything. She did so.

Colonel Gordon, having heard her out, put down Aubrey, sprang from his chair, and began pacing the room with lengthy strides. His face grew so gloomy that Val’s heart was filled with renewed foreboding.

“Aubrey did not know that your father was living, if I understand you rightly?” he said, stopping before Val.

“No, sir; I was myself ignorant of it, as I have told you.”

He re-commenced walking to and fro. Aubrey was rather alarmed by his aspect, and took refuge amid the folds of his mother’s skirt.

“You have now taken up your abode with

your father?" the Colonel again asked, pausing in his walk.

"I have."

"It is a confoundedly awkward state of affairs," he muttered, angrily. "However, it's not your fault. Come, I will tell you what I have thought of," he added, re-seating himself. "You have a brother, you tell me, who lives in Australia? Well, if your father will agree to go out to him, I will supply the means, and give him a handsome sum to settle down with."

Val started.

"Will you propose this to him? In case—my—nephew—in case you—if we find that my nephew—" he was unable to frame the words, so he took it for granted that Val knew what he meant, and added, "then you, with your boy, can come and live with me. I will take a house which will suit us three, if you can bear with an old man's whims and oddities."

The tears sprang to Val's eyes, and she bent her head. Aubrey looked with vague surprise at his mother and grand-uncle.

"But," said Val, "that would be virtually driving my father away."

“Consult with your father, or ask him to call upon me. I will talk with him.”

Colonel Gordon seemed quite unlike his former self. His voice, his manner, were perfectly unlike what they had been in earlier days.

Val said that she would inform her father of what had happened, and that she would leave it to him to decide what should be done.

“Good-bye, my dear child,” said he to her as she was departing. “Good-bye, Aubrey. Will you kiss me?”

“Yes,” said the child, smiling, and putting up his ruby lips.

CHAPTER XI.

A HEART STRUGGLE.

A LOAD was raised from Raymond's heart on finding that his child was honourably the wife of Aubrey Verner. But the proposition of Colonel Gordon that he should leave her—leave her at the very time when she might need all his care, when she might be newly widowed, was insupportable to him.

He passionately refused to even see Colonel Gordon.

“It is unjust to seek to deprive me of my child—I may say now the only child left to me, and to drive me away from the land of my birth, now that I am an old man,” he bitterly cried.

Val, who thought that he imagined her

chief anxiety was to rid herself of him, bent her head, and did not reply.

“ You do not love me—you do not care for me. You want to drive me away,” he continued, passionately. “ I will not go. To think that my own child should wish to get rid of me! But I will not go.”

“ You are unjust papa,” said Val, in a low tone. “ You are cruel.”

“ Cruel! It is you who are cruel, you who are unjust—unloving—unkind.”

He ran on, saying many sharp, reproachful things to her. She felt this harshness sorely, but would not let him provoke her to say anything in return. At length, snatching up his hat and violin-case, he went out, banged the door of the room with violence, went downstairs, and out from the house.

The cool air restored him to something of his usual quietude. He walked on until he reached the Tottenham-court-road, and thence to Oxford-street. His thoughts were like stinging nettles. He felt it to be a very cruel thing that his own child should propose to him to go away because he was a disgrace to her. He did not choose to analyse his mixed

motives for resenting the offer of Colonel Gordon ; yet he knew that he would ruin her and her child if he stayed in England.

As he was marching along Oxford-street, he noticed two men approaching. They were both dressed elaborately, in the newest fashion, with a prodigious display of jewellery. These men were strutting from the direction of Regent-street, with a jaunty air, and were evidently desirous of being regarded as persons of very great importance.

As they came nearer, Raymond recognized them as Farley and Braxford.

Within a few yards of him they suddenly paused and shook hands. Braxford lifted up an umbrella no thicker than a cane, and hailed a Hansom, into which he stepped, and dashed off. Farley continued to advance towards Raymond, whom, however, he did not see until he almost brushed past him. Raymond was discreet enough not to endeavour to claim his notice, but, taken by surprise, Farley stopped.

“ Ah, Raymond—that you ? By Jove, I never expected to see you. How do ? ” he said,

in a patronizing manner. "Still at the old business—hey? Same old shop?"

Raymond resented the impertinence of the way in which he spoke, and answered curtly.

"By Jove, though, you needn't get up in your stirrups for nothing," cried Farley, flourishing a white cambric handkerchief loaded with scent. "Ex-cuse me, I can't stop. Hurry—appointment—got to meet a fellow."

He nodded, and passed on quickly.

"Hang the feller," he muttered, as he hastened his steps. "Dirty, shabby scamp. He was deuced impudent. Poor Roger in distress with a vengeance. Why the dickens—it was just like his impudence to speak to me at all."

The galling words and manner of Farley fell on the heart of Raymond like drops of vitriol. How low he must have sunk, for this man to address him as he had done. The very sunshine was blackened to him. He wandered on vaguely, pausing occasionally to gaze vacantly in at the shop windows. He stopped for several minutes before the window of a gunsmith's shop, and pondered over some pistols which were lying there. His face was gloomy, overcast with dark thought. Then he wan-

dered on, in the same vague way, down Regent-street, and on until he reached Charing-cross, down the Strand, and on towards the Middlesex Theatre.

He paid the toll mechanically, and passed over Waterloo Bridge. When midway, he stepped into one of the recesses and looked into the river. The calm yet rapid flow of the water seemed to have some strange fascination for him. He gazed for a long time steadily, with an air of wild yearning, into the river. At the end of perhaps ten minutes, however, he heard some one stop beside him, and was conscious that he was being scrutinized. Looking round he was startled to see a policeman standing by, with an aspect of suspicion.

With a grimace, indicative of anger, Raymond sprang from the stone bench on which he had stepped and hurried on; nor did he again stop until he reached the theatre.

He did not return to dinner, nor to tea, nor to supper. With the feeling of that new and terrible revelation on her, Val did not dare to go to bed, as she had hitherto done whenever he happened to be very late. She lighted the lamp, took out some of her father's old shirts

and socks, and began her task of mending. Her father had made an arrangement on first coming to the house, that the street-door should be left unlocked, in order that he might be able to open it with his latch-key.

Twelve—one—two o'clock struck. Then she heard his step.

She took up the lamp, and went out on the landing. With a trembling hand she held the light to guide her father as he scrambled up the stairs. He gained the landing, stumbled into the sitting-room, and passed into his own room without taking the slightest notice of his daughter.

Val ran downstairs, leaving her lamp on the table in the little sitting-room. She had a misgiving that her father had not locked and bolted the door on coming in, and she found that it was scarcely closed. She locked it, shot the bolts, put up the chain, and then stole noiselessly upstairs again.

A glance told her that he was lying on his bed, already sleeping heavily. She threw a covering over him, and glided away.

A fortnight elapsed. A terrible coldness existed between Raymond and his daughter,

caused principally by his own ill-humour. In the effort to resign herself to relinquishing both for herself and her child the brilliant offers of her husband's uncle, Val had reduced herself to a state of semi-apathy. She reconciled herself to the hard fate before her by saying that Colonel Gordon could not see the only child of his beloved nephew at the mercy of a pitiless world without extending a hand to help him ; and for herself she scarcely cared. Her only longing for herself was to hear if her husband was still living. If he was living and returned—from that point she dared not venture on. Indeed, she was still the sport of a capricious fate ; she knew not whether Aubrey was living or dead.

She was sitting one afternoon, buried in painful thought, alone, when Rose came in, unannounced.

Seeing her looking so utterly dejected, Rose threw her arms round Val with impulsive affection and kissed her.

“ Why didn't you answer my letter ? ” cried Rose, sitting down without ceremony.

“ Your letter ? ”

“ My child, I wrote to you last week, want-

ing to know what you were doing, and how everything was going on, and not receiving a reply, fancied you must be ill, so came over in a desperate hurry."

"I received no letter," answered Val.

"It must have miscarried, or—never mind. What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing! How—what! But you—don't you mean to accept old Gordon's proposition?"

"You know," said Val, in so low a tone that Rose could scarcely catch her words—"you know that it does not rest with me to decide."

"Does your father decline to accede?"

"He—he does."

"He refuses to go? This is perfectly infamous! I shall talk to him, and see what can be done. He shan't remain in England if I can help it. What! ruin you and your child for a whim! Pray, what's there so enchanting in the idea of staying here that he refuses to leave the country?"

"It is only natural that he would not like to quit his native land for ever, and he thinks he ought not to leave me unprotected."

"Fudge and fiddlesticks! A pretty state

of things! Poor unprotected female! Would he go if you went with him?"

"I don't know—I did not ask him. Why do you ask?"

"It occurred to me that he gave that reason simply as an excuse."

"Don't—don't, Rose—I am very miserable."

"I have no doubt of it."

Val threw her arms round her friend's neck and suddenly began to cry, to the extreme discomfiture of Rose, who could do nothing of a more restorative nature than petting her in an energetic manner.

"I can perfectly sympathize with you, my poor darling. Your duty to your husband and child pulls you one way; your duty to your father drags you in the opposite direction. I wish—I do wish that we could learn how that unfortunate Aubrey Verner is going on. I have a kind of instinctive feeling that he is living—and that is something."

"Yes," answered Val, brushing away the tears, "I, too, feel that he cannot be lost to me."

"Well, if he returns to England, all will be well. But I certainly think that your father

ought to go when he knows that he is in the way. It's outrageous for him to stay when he isn't wanted."

"Hush, hush! my darling Rose. You must not speak so."

"Well, I only say what I think"—which was true, for Rose had her own private reasons for greatly desiring that her uncle should agree to Colonel Gordon's proposition. "I will see your father and speak to him."

Val trembled. She feared that Rose would say something to hurt her father's feelings, and confirm his idea that they wanted to get rid of him. She explained to Rose that she wished not to say anything more to her father on the subject, at least at present.

"Your child's prospects will be brilliant if his grand-uncle takes a decided fancy to him. If he grows up without any particular care, what will he be? How can you educate him, how will you put him forward in life? The very fact of being the grandson of such a poverty-stricken—pardon me, of George Raymond" (she repeated the name with mocking emphasis—indeed, she had been about to add "of such a disreputable old man," only she

checked herself)—“that one fact will be a bar——”

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t torture me!” cried Val, despairingly. “Spare me—spare me, Rose. Each word that you utter is like a sharp dagger drawn through my heart.”

“If a pig-headed old man’s——”

Val put her hands to her ears.

“If anyone spoke against your father would you not suffer?” she cried again.

“Perhaps you are right. It’s very hard, though, for both of us, and above all, for that poor little wretch Aube. And suppose your husband recovers, and comes back——”

Val clasped her hands, and looked at Rose with inexpressible anguish in her face. Rose was silenced.

“Well, it’s no use talking,” she resumed, after the lapse of some four or five minutes. “I shall go. I shall expect a letter from you in a few days—say a week—telling me how you are getting on.”

Val flung her arms round Rose, and strained her in a fervent embrace. Rose kissed her and left the room, commanding Val not to

come downstairs with her, as she seemed tired and in want of rest.

"It is a thousand pities for himself and everybody else that the old wretch ever thought of coming back," muttered Rose, passionately, as she descended the stairs. "Why couldn't he stay where he had a chance of being comfortable, and not come bothering people in this way? Some folks are born only to torment everybody about them."

She was about to open the street-door—the people of the house were not in the habit of exercising much ceremony towards those who visited either themselves or their lodgers—when she was anticipated by some one from without, who opened it with a latch-key and entered the narrow passage. Rose stepped aside as the door was pushed in, but uttered a slight exclamation of surprise on seeing that the individual who entered was Raymond.

Raymond was even more surprised to see his niece than she could be to see him enter his own dwelling. Rose, by an unconquerable impulse, resolved to speak to him on the subject of the unpalatable proposition of Colonel Gordon, regardless of what Val might think.

She had her own motives for wishing him to leave England, and she reflected that it was a piece of folly to allow the golden opportunity offered by Colonel Gordon to pass.

“Good morning,” she said, unceremoniously. “I came to see Val, because I wanted to know what she was doing. I did not gain much satisfaction from my visit.”

Raymond looked at his niece.

“You are in the cabal against me, I suppose?” he asked, with some bitterness.

“There is no cabal against you. Why should there be? I want to speak to you, though.”

“Do not inform the entire household of our private affairs. Come in here,” said Raymond, opening the door of a small, dark parlour.

“Now, madam, what do you want to say?”

“Simply this. You have had a proposition laid before you. To accept that proposition is to materially advance your daughter’s interests, and to place her child in a brilliant position—to place him where he will be able to—”

“Pray, what business have you to interfere?” demanded Raymond, irate at her speech.

“ What right have you to come between us—between me and my child ?”

“ Every right. The right of justice—right against wrong, if you like. What right have you to stand in this pig-headed manner, ruining the future of your daughter and of her child—eh ? Suppose her husband returns—what will he think ? You know he is ignorant of your existence——”

“ You speak as if my existence attached a stigma to my daughter’s name,” cried Raymond, angrily.

“ So it does,” answered Rose, coolly—“ so it does. Open your eyes, look away from your own selfish view of the case, and regard it as it is. You leave your daughter when she is a child and in need of your protection, and when it might have been a real injury to be thrown on the mercies of the world ; and now, when you ought to leave her, when it would be to her of the greatest advantage for you to quit her, you persist in marring her welfare by remaining with her, casting the blight of your presence over her.”

“ You dare to come to my house, with reproaches against me ?”

“Your house? Your miserable paltry lodgings.”

“Are luxuries and the good things of this life to be placed in rivalry with love and duty?”

“Pish! I hate affectation. You talk like a stupid boy. I don’t suppose my words will weigh with you, but at all events I have had the satisfaction of imparting to you my opinion of your conduct.”

She was in such a passion that she ran from the room, and tried to open the street door. Being in a state of nervous agitation, however, she could not discover on the instant how the handle turned. Raymond followed her, to offer his assistance.

“It is very hard,” he said, in a more subdued tone than he had previously adopted, “very, very hard that I am to be driven away from my own country, as if I had committed some crime.”

Rose did not answer, but pushed by, and ran out to the street. He looked after, with a melancholy aspect, and she had not passed the next house when she came back, with something of penitence in her face.

“Uncle,” she said, extending her hand, “if I spoke to you hastily, I am sorry. But you know such obstinacy is enough to provoke a saint, much more such a cross-grained mortal as myself.”

He took her hand in silence, and a reconciliation was effected. Raymond closed the door, and going into the little parlour, sat down to meditate. His reflections were very bitter, and he remained buried in thought for nearly half an hour. At length he roused himself, and went upstairs.

Val had prepared his dinner, and the table was spread. The room, if very humble, looked very comfortable, thanks to the care of Val. She had put away her work, and was busy arranging a small bunch of flowers in a jar on the old sideboard.

As her father entered the room, Val went forward to meet him. Reproaching herself as she did with selfishness in having for a time secretly desired that he would accept Colonel Gordon’s offer, she was resolved to be doubly kind to him, in order to make him some reparation for being so cruel.

“My poor child,” said Raymond, putting

his arm round her, and suddenly pressing her to his breast. The reconciliation—if there could be said to be any reconciliation where there had been no quarrel—the re-establishment of filial and paternal friendship was complete.

Raymond sat down, and they began dinner in perfect amity. She did not tell him of Rose's visit, being at a loss what motive to assign for it; and he, for reasons of his own, did not mention having encountered Rose at the street-door. Dinner over, Val was clearing the table, when her father abruptly asked—

“Where does this—Colonel Gordon live?”

Val was so surprised by the question that several minutes elapsed before she could speak. Her reply was simply to state the name of the street and the number of the house in which Colonel Gordon lived.

Without entering into any explanation, Raymond took up his hat.

“Papa—what are you going to do?”

“I will tell you when I return,” he answered.

“Papa, I wish I had not told you. I wish

I had not allowed myself to be persuaded to go near Colonel Gordon at all."

"My child, you have been right. I alone have been wrong."

"Oh, papa, don't say so. Papa, I am very unhappy."

"I know it," said Raymond, sadly. "You could not well be otherwise."

"I meant, papa, because I am, as it were, a kind of torment to you."

"On the contrary, it is I who am destined to be the torment and the blight of your existence."

"Don't say so, papa,—dear papa, oh, don't say so," cried Val, throwing her arms round his neck, and clinging to him, with beseeching words and looks. "Oh, papa, all would be right if I had not married——"

"Do you regret your marriage? You love your husband and your child?"

"Oh, papa, papa, papa, I wish I could do what is right——"

"Do not distress yourself, my darling. Your duty is to do what will be best for your husband and child. My duty is—is plainly set before me."

“Papa, do nothing until—until we hear if—something of Aub—my husband.”

“My dearest, I have already been too vacillating. We must think of the future of your child. I must not be selfish.”

“It is I who am selfish—it is I who am the means of driving you away. Oh, papa, what shall I do? Oh, papa, why did you let them part me from you when I was a child? Why did you not always keep me with you, and then we should have been always together, and I should not be thus torn by distracting hopes and fears?”

Raymond sighed deeply as he looked down on the troubled face upturned to his.

“It is better as it is. Life is a tangled skein, after all. It is difficult to understand some of its lessons. I have been turning over the pages of a book from my boyhood, and now I find that I have not learnt the alphabet of the language in which it is written, and so cannot read it—now, when it is too late. Do not grieve, my pet. What is one place to me more than another, that I should object to leave England? I have not been so happy in this country that I should break my

heart at seeing its shores recede from my sight."

Val could not restrain her sobs as she rested her head against her father's shoulder; but she soon succeeded in regaining her self-possession.

"I am going to see Colonel Gordon. Do not shiver so, my darling. Do not fear; all will be for the best. I trusted you to a stranger before, when you were a child, and now that you are able to take care of yourself, why should I be afraid to quit your side? And if God spares the life of Captain Verner, and he returns, I shall leave you happy." His voice trembled a little. "Sit down, my child. I hope Colonel Gordon will be at home."

He pressed a kiss on her forehead, disengaged her arms from about him, took up his hat, and was gone.

Val sank on her knees by the chair from which she had risen; she bowed her head on her clasped hands, but in a few minutes lifted her eyes, streaming with tears, to the bright sky visible through the window.

"My God! have pity on me!" she cried

aloud. “Help me; preserve me from the sin of selfishness. Guide me—help me!”

She heard the clock strike. She remained still on her knees, waiting for her father. The clock struck again, and still she moved not.

The clock was beginning to strike for the third time, when she caught the sound of some one opening the street door. She sprang up and waited, facing the door of the room. Her father was coming up the stairs, but her heart beat so wildly that she could not stir from the place where she was standing. He walked very slowly, step by step, until he reached the door of the room.

Val, with an effort, advanced as he entered.

Raymond was ashy pale, but his lips were compressed, and there was an indescribable air of resolution about him.

“It is settled,” he said. “At the end of two months, I leave England for ever.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE END OF GEORGE RAYMOND'S JOURNEY.

THE outward state of affairs altered very little during the rapid lapse of the stipulated two months. Colonel Gordon wished to see his little grand-nephew very often, and became so much attached to him, that at length he made an arrangement whereby the child was to visit him once every day. It was Rose who usually attended Master Aubrey on these visits, for Val was unwilling to leave her father for an hour during the day.

Raymond had accepted a sum from Colonel Gordon to pay his expenses out, and a small annuity, for it was not to be thought of that he should fall a burden on Charley and his wife. He was conscious that his son and Emma, Charley's wife, would gladly receive

him, and he wrote a letter to Charley, warning him that he was going out to live with him. He still fulfilled his duties at the Middlesex Theatre, but he gave the manager notice that he purposed leaving England at the end of two months.

It was a week before the day on which it was fixed that he should go. Everything was ready. He knew no one who would care to shake him by the hand and wish him "God speed." His daughter was the only being in all England who took the slightest kindly interest in his movements. He did not send any intimation of his intended departure to his brother Guy—why should he?

It would be impossible to define Val's feelings, they were so complicated.

Rose had too much tact and delicacy to betray that she was glad, but it was useless to deny that she was greatly pleased.

Little Aubrey knew nothing about it. Colonel Gordon was simply satisfied that he was about to be rid of a person who had it in his power to be very disagreeable.

Only a few days intervened between Raymond and his voyage. Val would have given

almost anything to keep him in England; but he was now as obstinate in his determination to go as he had before been in resolving to stay. He was to sail from Southampton. It was settled that Val should accompany him to the port; and Rose had declared her intention of going with her, for many reasons.

Val was alone, kneeling before one of the trunks containing her father's clothes, when she was startled by a sharp knock at the door of the room. She rose and opened it, when she saw Harry Anthony with a letter in his hand.

"Please, this has just come, and he wants an answer," said the boy.

Val tore open the envelope. It contained a hurried message, written on a sheet of note paper:—

"**MY DEAR CHILD,**—If you can spare time, come to me immediately. I wish to see you—most particularly.

"Yours,

"**ROTHSAY GORDON.**"

The address and date were subjoined.

What could he mean? what did he want? Val ran to a table, tore off one side of the paper on which he had written—for she had no paper at hand—and scribbled a hasty message with a pencil, to the effect that she would be with him as soon as possible. She looked about, and at length found an envelope, in which she placed her note, and gave it to the boy.

“Give this to the messenger,” she said to Harry.

The boy went away, and, with trembling hands, she completed her task of packing. As she placed the last article in the trunk, her father returned. She showed him the note.

“You ought to go at once,” he said, with decision.

She put on her bonnet and shawl, and hurried off, taking the omnibus for greater speed. Intuitively she felt that the note had some reference to her husband. In this surmise she was correct.

“Can you bear good news?” said Colonel Gordon, almost as she entered his sitting-room.

“Do not keep me in suspense, I entreat you, sir,” exclaimed Val.

“Take some wine. Sit down. It is good news, not bad.”

He held an open letter in his hand, and as he spoke, the paper fluttered from the nervousness of his clasp.

“A friend has written to me, to say that my nephew has recovered more rapidly than was anticipated.”

Val drew a deep breath.

“Go on, sir, I implore you.”

“He was too weak to write himself, but when able to move, he was to be shipped off to England.”

A faint cry escaped Val. It seemed to her that the whole room was swimming round. Colonel Gordon was alarmed by her pallor, but in a few minutes she revived.

“It was expected that he would be sufficiently strong to travel in—let me see—a month or six weeks from the date of this letter. Then we may look for him—ah! two, four—a month or six weeks from this present time.”

It is easier to picture grief or despair than

pure joy. Of clouds and tempest the poorest artist may give some reflex; it taxes the utmost skill of a Turner or a Claude to transfer the glorious sunshine to canvas.

“Do you know, sir, if he has received any letters from England?” asked Val, timidly, the first rush of emotion having passed.

“He evidently had not at the date of this letter; it is not written by himself, but by a friend, at his desire; at the end he has scrawled a few lines, complaining that he has not received a message of any kind from England.”

“I—I wrote to him, and a—my friend Mrs. Milburn—also wrote to him, and I think the letters must have miscarried.”

“It is not impossible. It seems strange. However, if all be well, you will hear more on the subject from him than I can tell you.”

Val left Colonel Gordon, and returned to her father, to whom she communicated the news.

The last day on which they would be together came only too soon. It was arranged that, as the vessel was to sail early the following day, they should go down by the train to

Southampton in the evening, and stay overnight, Rose accompanying them. Having obtained a three weeks' rest, she was able to do so without sustaining any loss or vexation.

On this morning Rose brought Aubrey to the lodging of his grandfather, that they might exchange a final farewell. Aubrey behaved with tolerable propriety upon this occasion. He submitted to be placed on his grandfather's knee, to be stroked and petted, and even, as a great favour, to be kissed. Rose sent the child back to her own house, in the care of a servant whom she had brought with her, and whom she sent away in the cab in which she had come.

About six o'clock they left the house for ever, for Rose had settled that Val should stay with her until Captain Verner's return to England.

At the request of Val, Harry Anthony was sent by his mother for a cab, Raymond's boxes and various packages were piled on the roof; he and Val, and Rose, got in, having taken a kindly farewell of the Anthony family, and they drove off.

Not a word was spoken during the drive.

Val held her father's hands firmly clasped in her own, and laid her head against his shoulder, as she had once before done during a sad drive many years before.

They reached the Waterloo Station ; Rose and Val walked up and down the platform, whilst Raymond obtained the tickets. Presently Raymond rejoined them, and the three walked to and fro, silently. At length, when it wanted a few minutes of the time of starting, they took their seats in a second-class carriage.

Knowing that her face betrayed the grief which she felt, Val turned her head aside, and looked out from the window. Some passengers who had arrived late were hurrying past, and among them a remarkable figure attracted Val's observation. She glanced at Rose, but discovered that she was looking from the opposite window, and then she turned her eyes on her father, who appeared to have disposed himself for sleep, his head being bent on his chest. Neither of them had seen the hurrying figure ; neither knew that Guy Atherley had just flitted within a few feet of them—was perhaps even now only divided

from them by three or four inches of wood and leather.

With the exception of a quiet, sleepy man—who might have been either a commercial traveller, or a detective, or anything else of a tranquil and respectable nature—the sad little party had the carriage to themselves.

The whistle sounded—the creaking and peculiar “whishing” noise of the engine warned them that they were about to start on their journey. In a few moments they were off.

Mile after mile was traversed. Not a word was exchanged. Even when the train stopped at a station, none of the four occupants of the carriage moved. The sleepy man once or twice raised his head, but he did not unroll himself from the spacious rug in the folds of which he had wrapped himself. Gradually the even motion and the silence had so lulling an effect on the nerves of Raymond, that he fell asleep.

They had left one of the stations behind about ten minutes when the train, which had recommenced its rapid pace, slackened by degrees. Despite their preoccupation, this

surprised the travellers. They looked at each other.

“I hope there is nothing amiss,” said the quiet man, speaking for the first time.

As he uttered the words, the shriek of a whistle, and the sound of another train approaching, were distinctly heard. There was a shock—a sudden smash—instantaneously. Val was flung with violence against Rose, the quiet man saved himself by catching at the strap of the window and falling on his knee. Raymond, who had fallen asleep, was defenceless. His head was dashed against the framework against which he had been lying; he was then pitched forward against the partition opposite, and thrown back again by the rocking of the carriage.

A collision had occurred.

The scene that ensued was fearful. Shrieks, groans, cries, yells, rent the night air. Val, Rose, and the quiet man, regained their seats; Raymond lay back motionless, in almost exactly the same position which he had occupied before the accident.

“Are you hurt?” asked the quiet man, addressing Val and Rose.

“ My arm is bruised,” said Rose, piteously.

“ My hand is scratched,” said Val.

“ Happy for you that it is nothing worse, young ladies. I am nearly shaken to pieces,” said he.

They all instantly turned to Raymond. The quiet man touched him, in the way that nobody but physicians or surgeons ever touch people. He contracted his eyebrows, examined him again, Val and Rose watching every motion, and ready at a moment’s notice to render him any assistance he might require.

“ This gentleman—is he related to either of you, may I ask?” he said, letting Raymond lie back.

“ He is my friend’s father,” said Rose, in a voice which was scarcely audible in the uproar.

The look which passed over his face told them the fatal truth.

George Raymond—poor George Atherley, was dead.

“ I am a physician,” said their new friend. “ You are certain that you have sustained no further injuries besides the bruises and scratches?”

Neither answered. Rose passed her arm

round Val, fearing that she would swoon ; but Val, merely shivering when Rose wound her arm about her, sat perfectly still. The doctor opened the door, got out, and then asked them if they would like to alight. Rose, loosing Val, stepped out, and Val, fearing to be left, followed Rose closely.

“Wait,” said the doctor, pushing them gently on one side.

He stepped into the carriage again, laid the body of the dead man decently on the seat, at full length, and threw his railway rug over it ; then he rejoined the ladies.

The scene which met their view, on gazing around, was indescribably terrible. Some unhappy victims—men, women, and children—were lying dead, or dying, or fainting ; some were crushed or mangled in such a manner that death must have been instantaneous. The mutilated and crushed bodies of the killed and wounded were mixed up with the iron and wood-work of the carriages in a frightful heap. The shrieks of the panic-stricken passengers yet in the carriages, and of those who had emerged and were seeking for their friends, were appalling. Some had thrown themselves

from the carriages, and were running wildly about the fields in the darkness, uttering the most agonizing cries. The wreck of the train was lying on the lines. The steam and smoke from the engines were belching forth in volumes, scalding, stifling, blinding those in the vicinity; the steam was pouring upon the corpses, and upon the writhing bodies of the yet living, inflicting unutterable torture. The fire from the furnace-engines cast around a lurid glare, seeming only to render the scene more horrible; whilst the flickering lamps, which the guards had removed from the roofs of the carriages, were to be obscurely discerned, crossing hither and thither in apparently objectless confusion.

A large fire was made with the fragments of one of the carriages, and by its flaring light many persons were drawn from beneath the wheels, axletrees, and carriages.

Assistance had already arrived. A small body of police were moving about, and hundreds of people came running from the neighbouring cottages with lanterns.

Val turned from this horrid sight, and clung to Rose. The doctor went to offer his aid,

leaving the two young women standing together, motionless, almost paralysed by horror. Val was the first to recover from this stupor.

“Rose,” she said, putting her lips close to Rose’s ear, “there is some one among these passengers whom I saw as we were about to leave London.”

Rose turned her face towards Val, startled by her tone, which she heard distinctly enough amid the surrounding din.

“I am going to tell you something which will try your nerves.”

“What? Speak! You terrify me by your manner. Some one?—whom do you mean?”

“Your father is among the passengers.”

“My father? Here?—impossible!”

Val did not reply.

“Are you sure of what you say? Great Heavens! Here?—you saw him?”

“I saw him run past the window of the carriage in which we were seated, and he did not return; therefore he must have got into one of the first-class carriages.”

Rose trembled for a moment, then looked round wildly, trying to discern amid the con-

stantly moving crowd the face and figure of her father.

“Will you let me go for a few minutes?—I must go,” she said, with frightful calmness; “I will return to you. Will you be alarmed if I leave you for a few minutes?”

“Don’t go—you will not be able to find him.”

“I must go. I feel as if I were going mad. Yet I cannot go—I dare not leave you.”

“It is not fear for myself, but for you that I feel.”

Reassured by her tone, Rose darted away, leaving Val standing alone.

When Rose’s form had disappeared amid the lurid glare, Val crept into the carriage where her father was lying dead. She knew that the doctor had placed him on the seat, and the transient flash of a passing torch showed her that he was covered with a rug.

She knelt beside him, and took his hand, cold as clay, over which she bowed her head.

“It is I who have killed you, O, my father!” she said. “I have slain you—I am your murderer. If it had not been for me, you would not have been here on this fatal

night. This is my doing, my father, my father ! It is the child whom you loved—the child for whom you have dared many dangers—the child for whose sake you were leaving your birthplace for ever—it is your own child who has brought you to this.”

The wild roar around her seemed to grow fainter. She tried to rouse herself, but was unable to move. Then she heard nothing more—everything was blotted out. She had fallen into a death-like swoon on the floor of the carriage.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST LINK.

WHEN Val revived from her stupor, she found that she was lying in a small, clean bed—dressed, with the exception of her bonnet and mantle, which had been removed. An old woman was bending over her, with an anxious air.

“Where am I? Where is—”

“Hush, deary,” said the old woman, raising her finger in a warning manner. “You’re to keep quite quiet.”

This motherly old body hustled to the door of the room, and called softly. In a few minutes Rose entered, and approached the bed where Val was now sitting up.

“How are you now, darling? You have

been from one fainting fit into another for several hours. We found you lying senseless, Dr. Marshall and I—Dr. Marshall is the gentleman who was travelling with us," said Rose, informing her in a few sentences of everything she could wish to know. "I have telegraphed to London for my mother, sister, and Frank. The dead have been sent on to Southampton, which is twenty miles hence, and the wounded have been disposed of in the cottages about, and in some of the houses. I have found my father. He is—dying!"

Val grew whiter than she had been, and cowered back; then she got up, and persisted in accompanying Rose to the adjoining room, where Guy Atherley was lying, in an insensible state, in bed. He was perfectly pallid, and was almost rigid. Dr. Marshall was standing beside him, with his finger on the dying man's wrist, his eyes on the dial of his watch.

"He has been shattered; his right leg has been broken, and he is too weak, too much exhausted, to be able to bear the agony of amputation," said Rose, in a strangely calm undertone, to Val. "Dr. Marshall thinks it

will be a marvel if—if—if he lasts—until morning."

Val looked at her, wondering at this extraordinary calmness. As Rose ceased to speak, the hitherto insensible man opened his eyes. Rose happened to be standing within the radius of light caused by the two candles which had been placed on the table. Without speaking, he raised his arms, looking at his child. Rose sprang forward, and threw herself on his neck. The sound of her sobbing alone broke the profound silence.

As Rose lifted her head, an old clergyman, who had been sent for by the wish of Dr. Marshall, entered the small room. It fell to the lot of this venerable man to tell Guy Atherley that his hours were numbered.

"I cannot possibly live till morning!" muttered the dying man, in an indistinct voice. "I can never see my poor little Floret." He held out his hand to Rose, who clasped it. "I cannot even give a parting word of kindness to—Frank Milburn." Rose kissed his hands passionately.

They all remained. The hours slowly wasted away, until it was nearly daybreak. Rose sat on

one side of the bed, one of her hands holding the left hand of her father. The constant ticking of an old Dutch clock in the next room sounded painfully distinct in the otherwise silent house. Occasionally Rose administered a strong stimulant to her father. At length Dr. Marshall was summoned to attend some of the wounded and dying; the clergyman was also called away; and then Rose, beckoning Val, commanded her to go immediately to bed. At first, Val refused to leave her, but feeling exhausted, in a semi-fainting condition, and knowing that she was useless where she was, she obeyed.

Rose also dismissed the old woman, and was thus left alone with her father. She took the opportunity, after giving him a powerful restorative, of telling him of the death of his brother George.

He looked at her, an indescribable expression in his eyes.

“Dead?” he repeated.

He closed his eyes, and did not speak for a long time. Rose watched him with profound melancholy.

“Papa,” she whispered, putting her face against his, “have you forgiven your brother?”

Her father did not answer. She repeated the question, and he opened his eyes.

“Papa—one word. Say yes.”

He compressed his lips, and would not utter the monosyllable.

“He is dead, papa, and past your resentment. Papa—speak.”

“I have forgiven you your disobedience and want of love. Let that content you,” he said, icily.

“Papa, we have not concealed from you——”

“That I am dying? I know it.” A frightful shiver passed through his frame.

“Papa, you will not follow him with anger in your heart? Dear papa!”

“You annoy me by persisting in speaking on the subject. I do not wish to hear anything more of him. Why do you annoy me?”

“His daughter—my cousin Val—is under this very roof. Your brother has——”

It was in vain that she pleaded. He interrupted her with a frown, and at length she was obliged to desist. Then she remained utterly silent, watching the fatal changes in his countenance.

The day dawned. First Dr. Marshall, and

then the venerable clergyman returned ; the old woman, the mistress of the cottage, also came in ; and lastly, Val stole into the room, and sat down, not obtruding herself, but situating herself so that Rose could see her, and sign, if she wanted any assistance.

The morning crept on. The last terrible change was approaching. Dr. Marshall told Rose so.

Guy Atherley suddenly opened his eyes, and fixed them on the door. In a few minutes Mrs. Atherley, Floretta, and Frank Milburn entered. Guy Atherley recognised them all, without uttering more than a few words, and extended his hand to Frank, which the young man clasped earnestly.

About half an hour elapsed, and then Dr. Marshall gave Rose a warning look. All was nearly over. She determined to make a final effort in the cause which she had undertaken.

“ Father,” she said, speaking very low, “ will you say that you no longer bear any feeling of anger against my poor uncle George ? You have forgiven him, have you not ? ”

Her father looked up at her with fast glazing eyes. He did not answer for several

minutes. They were all kneeling, or standing round his death-bed.

“If he were here now, father, you would give him your hand—would you not?”

“No,” said Guy Atherley, with startling emphasis, “I would not—I *could* not.”

His eyes closed, his head fell heavily against his daughter’s breast,—a short, rattling breath, and Guy Atherley was dead.

Rose did not need to be told the fatal truth. She held him for a moment, until Dr. Marshall gently disengaged her. Then, for perhaps the first time in her life, she fainted, and her mother, sister, and Val carried her from the room.

The arrival of Mrs. Atherley and of Frank exempted Rose and Val from any active responsibility. It was considered necessary that Val should go on to Southampton, as she would be obliged to identify the body of her father. Rose suggested that she should send a message by telegraph to Colonel Gordon, informing him of what had happened. To this Val agreed, of course, and the message was sent immediately.

Val, accompanied by Rose and Floretta, went on to Southampton after a day's rest. Mrs. Atherley stayed with Frank at the cottage, for she wished to carry back the body of her husband to London.

The terrible duty of identifying the body of her father had been fulfilled by Val, and he was interred at Southampton. A simple white stone, engraved with the name "George Atherley," and the dates of his birth and death, and a brief text from Scripture, marked the spot where he lay, peacefully sleeping after a troubled life.

Rose was too ill to be moved. She was compelled to resign her situation at the Music Hall, where she had so long reigned dominant; for it would be impossible for her to appear for at least a couple of months. Floretta, however, returned to town.

Colonel Gordon had sent a very kind message to Val offering his sympathy, although in reality he was secretly pleased to hear the news. She then wrote, giving him her present address.

A fortnight passed. In the anxiety attending Rose's illness—which was, after all, merely

a temporary shock—Val had no time to think of herself, and therefore did not suffer so much as she might otherwise have done. When Rose was able to get out, and they were both dressed in suitable mourning, they walked in the vicinity of Southampton during the greater part of the day. Val frequently visited the grave of her poor father, beside which she shed many bitter, self-reproachful tears.

She wrote again to Colonel Gordon, entreating him to give her timely information of when her husband might be expected, and at what port he would land. About three weeks after her arrival at Southampton, she received a letter from Colonel Gordon, telling her to remain at Southampton, as her husband would come by Havre, his friend, Captain Falconer, with whom he was travelling, wishing to visit some friends at that place. As he (Colonel Gordon) was prohibited by Dr. Edwards from moving about more than was absolutely necessary, he requested her to take a suite of apartments in the principal hotel for Aubrey Verner and his friend, Captain Falconer. He added that he would send her timely information of the

name of the steamer by which his nephew would come. In a postscript he said that Aubrey had received the letters which had been written by Val and by Rose Milburn, which had been mislaid by an accident. Colonel Gordon reassured her by mentioning that he had written to Aubrey at some length, explaining the existing state of affairs, and that it would be unnecessary to write to Aubrey, as he was travelling very rapidly, and would probably miss any letters now addressed to him.

Val fairly sobbed for joy over this letter. The thought that within a few days, in all human probability, she would be clasped to her husband's breast, repaid her for any suffering she might have endured. She did not surmise that Colonel Gordon, knowing that his nephew was well again, was relapsing into a bad humour about his marriage.

She passed the letter to Rose, who read it gravely.

"We ought to have Aube here to greet his father," said Rose, as she returned the letter. "As for the arrangements about the rooms and all that, I will manage the entire business

for you, if you like, and then you will not have any trouble."

"But the trouble will fall on you."

"I like it—you don't, which makes all the difference."

Rose accordingly engaged rooms for Aubrey Verner, for Captain Falconer, and for herself and Val, and they went thither. In a few hours after the despatch of a letter from Rose, little Aubrey arrived, under the care of Frank Milburn.

Val waited with feverish impatience for the advent of her husband.

The days seemed to wear away with intolerable slowness. She could not settle to anything.

Colonel Gordon at length wrote to her, telling her that Captain Verner might be expected on the 16th of the month, and that he would come by the *Sea Wolf*.

The 16th arrived.

On the morning of that day Val went, accompanied by Rose, to the Docks. There were several people waiting, and one of them pointed out to her the *Sea Wolf*, which was rapidly steaming through the blue water.

Val waited with scarcely repressible impatience. As the vessel approached, she saw her husband leaning over the side. He knew, by his uncle's last letter, that she was in Southampton, and judged that she would in all likelihood come to meet him as he stepped on shore. He had a telescope in his hands, with which he was scanning the people visible on the landing-place.

"He sees us!" cried Val. "He is waving his hand! How thin and wasted he looks—how changed!"

"Oh, he will be all right after a time," replied Rose, cheerfully. "You must take care of him — nurse him well — that's all."

The *Sea Wolf* drew nearer and nearer. At last, it was quite close.

The passengers came on shore rapidly.

Captain Verner was so weak that he was obliged to lean for support on the arm of Captain Falconer, who was with him. His servant followed, carrying a heavy cloak and other wrappings, whilst Captain Falconer's servant saw to the safety of the luggage of both officers.

For a moment everything swam before Val's eyes.

The next instant she was folded in the arms of Aubrey Verner.

THE END. —



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